

ALFRED BUTLER

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
AFRO-AMERICANS IN SAN FRANCISCO
PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II

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(dates)

Alfred Butler
(Interviewee)

5/1/78
(Date)

Jesse J. Warr, III
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12-22-78
(Date)

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Co-Sponsored by:

The Friends of the San Francisco Public Library, and
The San Francisco African-American Historical and Cultural Society

Project Coordinator: Lynn Bonfield

INTERVIEW WITH ALFRED BUTLER (1890-1979)

10 DECEMBER, 1976

Interviewer: Albert Broussard

Transcriber: Albert Broussard

BEGIN TAPE 1

Bro: Can you tell me what year you were born?

But: June 22, 1890.

Bro: Were you born in San Francisco?

But: In Oakland.

Bro: Were your parents born in San Francisco?

But: My mother was born in San Jose, California. My father came from Baltimore, Maryland. All the brothers did, and then they went to Virginia. I think all the younger boys were born in the state of Virginia. My father, Sonny, Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, they were named after the presidents.

Bro: Why did the family come to San Francisco?

But: Why?

Bro: Why?

But: Well, my father came out here with some senator. I've forgotten who it was.

Bro: You mentioned Senator Clark last time.

But: Senator Clark. I think it was Senator Clark. You're right, Senator Clark. They came down to San Jose. They thought the mines were down there. He was interested in that so they brought my father out here as a sort of a valet. He was a young man at the time, and my mother, as I said, was born in San Jose and that's how they got acquainted. Senator Clark came out here, and my father and mother got together and married. He sent for all the boys to come out here, and brought them all out.

Bro: How much time passed before he sent for the rest of the kids to come out?

But: He was out here about a year and a half. Then he sent word how nice California was out here and he liked it out here and he sent

But: for the boys one by one and two by twos. Most of them could work their way out as a pullman porter or a waiter. He had to scheme someone so they could get out here. They all came out to California. They all settled in Oakland, California, across the bay.

Bro: When did you first move to San Francisco?

But: I've been here since 1928 or 1930. Make it 1928 to be almost exact.

Bro: So you were living primarily in Oakland, but working in San Francisco?

But: Since 1928. But before I moved over here I used to commute over here by taking the ferry. I quit my job in about 1917, 1918. World War I. I had been married and I lost my first wife. She died in childbirth. I was exempt because I had a little girl, the father of a motherless child. So they put me on a Class 3-A and I never did go in.

Bro: Did you spend your childhood in San Francisco or Oakland?

But: I spent my childhood in Oakland.

Bro: Did you attend the schools in Oakland?

But: Oh yes. Oakland High. But I didn't graduate. You see, before I lost my wife I got a job at H.S. Crocker Company, stationary wholesale firm. I worked there for about twelve years. That was as far as I could go. A young man, White kids could get a good job, like salesman, traveling around the state and so forth. But I still had the same job and I knew more than they did. As a Colored man you couldn't get a good job.

Bro: What type of work did you do at H.S. Crocker?

But: Stock clerk.

Bro: Was that your very first job?

But: Well, it was my first job to speak of. I carried newspapers and things like that. But that was my first job and I stuck with it, but my brother and I, we knew more than the manager knew. My older brother. The people that ran the place, we knew more than they knew. They used to ask us questions about this, where does this go, where did this come from, how many do we have and all that. But we didn't get enough money to pay us. We stayed in the same old job and they used to hire these young men and they would ask me, and they sent them to me and I would break them in. And they would be

- But: kind of haphazard, enough to get by, they get a promotion and be a salesman... the first thing they went, they would be out on the road selling good. But we stayed in the same old job.
- Bro: What kind of career goals did you have as a young man? What did you want to be?
- But: What did I want to be? I used to do sketches and draw cartoons free-lance, but I didn't follow that up. After I got married I just worked. Work. Finally, when the war came I had to quit Crocker and I thought I had to go to war, and then I worked at a garage doing this, doing that. Enough to pay my expenses and tide me over until another one came along.
- Bro: Did your family encourage you to go to school or did you have to get out and work as a young person?
- But: They wanted me to go to school, but a young guy out... whatever comes up... If I had listened to their advice I would have been something. It was impossible then to get a job. Then, in those days, you just could not get any kind of a job outside of shining shoes or something like that, no matter what type of education you got. Of course, things have changed now. If you're capable you can qualify and get any type of job you want.
- Bro: Where did you work after you left H.S. Crocker?
- But: Like I say, I worked around a garage and managed a garage about a year. The fellow who had the garage left me in charge. I was in charge of machines and everything. I was getting \$30 a week. I thought that was a good job so I stayed down there, then I came back, then finally I got married -- my second marriage -- then I got this job for this man as a chauffeur, Dr. Shumate.
- Bro: Do you remember what year you first started working with Dr. Shumate?
- But: Like I say, 1928 or 1930. I forget which.
- Bro: You moved over here permanently when you started working for him?
- But: I lived in Oakland and I commuted for a while; then finally I moved over here on Scott Street near Divisadero. I have a son in the Housing Authority. He's got a good job -- I don't know how it's classified, but he's got a good job.
- Bro: Is that the only child you have? Just that one son?
- But: No. I have a daughter.
- Bro: One daughter.
- But: She works at Macy's.
- Bro: How long did you work for Dr. Shumate?

But: He died in 1954 and the mother and the son just wouldn't let me go.

Bro: Are you still working for him?

But: Oh, yes. I still work for him doing things, just to be around.

They have a lot of property, I just check it and -- he doesn't know much about running things the way I did. I knew all the properties, you know, the tenants and all that. I used to go around collecting rent, and so on, just general work. But now I don't do anything because he's satisfied I'm just around the house.

Bro: How did you hook up with Dr. Shumate in the first place?

But: Well, I had an aunt who was a hairdresser and a masseur and she would work on rich people, regular customers. She would go and fix them up and massage them, fix their hair and so on. So she kind of said -- she talked to this lady, her name was Mrs. Nester, Dr. Shumate's sister-in-law, and my aunt asked her, she said, "Mrs. Nester, do you think Dr. Shumate would hire a man to drive?" So anyway she gave me the address and so on and it worked out. She told me to go see him. I did and we talked. First thing he said was come over with me from the drug store over to his house. He asked me a lot of questions. When I got married, so on and so forth, he said, "You come to work next week Monday." He had another Colored fellow and he let him go. Because Shumate was a police commissioner, fifteen, sixteen years. Worked under Jim Rolph. Rolph was mayor of San Francisco then. I took the job driving him around. He had seventeen stores. When he died he had thirty.

Bro: What kind of stores?

But: Drug stores. Shumate's Drugstores.

Bro: So he was a very wealthy person?

But: Oh, he was wealthy. The drug stores made a lot of money, and he owned a lot of property.

Bro: Did you have a good-paying job for a Negro at that time?

But: It would have been considered a good job. I guess I made more than the average man he had working for him because the man just took a liking to me. I did all the hiring of the Colored boys. Each drugstore had a Colored porter. When I came, a lot of White guys were working there, so I put all Colored in. That was a

But: good job then. They got \$18 a week in those days. We all liked it.

Bro: What types of jobs did you find most Black men and women in when you first started working for Dr. Shumate?

But: Either janitor or insurance office or bellboys in a hotel. Janitors and all that. That's about all the work you could get. Tough. You just could not get a job.

Bro: Would the labor unions let them in to work?

But: The unions were pretty tough. They wouldn't admit a Colored man, but he, Dr. Shumate, tried to get them in the painter's union, so he told me to go and get any Colored man you know and let him do the job. So I did. I got quite a few Colored men. Interior, you know, painting the walls and so on. He had a lot of properties.

Bro: What kind of job did you find most Black women working in?

But: Women?

Bro: Yes.

But: Well, about the same thing as -- mostly menial jobs. Domestic cooks, house cleaning or some kind of thing.

And to get a job downtown, in a store, there were very few working unless they could get by. Light complexion they would get by. About fifteen or twenty of them. I had a cousin, two cousins, they looked like [unintelligible]. You couldn't tell they were Colored. One got a job at the Emporium, one got a job at [unintelligible], and another one worked at Leibes and another friend worked at Excuse me. I have a problem. This bridge is too loose. I can't pronounce my words.

Bro: You're coming across fine.

But: I have to get a new plate put in. I just can't talk.

Bro: Were there many men working in the offices downtown around Montgomery?

But: I knew them all. Very few. They worked for insurance companies, the bank. Errand boys, messengers and so on. Not even a teller.

Bro: What types of jobs did they have in insurance companies?

But: Messengers, file clerks, errand boys.

Bro: Did you have many Negroes down at the railroad depot at Third and Townsend? Redcaps and porters?

But: Oh yes, they had redcaps and porters. About twenty-five of them

But: at Third and Townsend but most of them were down at the Ferry Building. That's where the redcaps were. They used to carry the luggage on the boat on the pier, check the bags to the San Francisco to Oakland Sunset route.

Bro: Was that job considered a good job for a Negro?

But: Oh it was good. \$40 a month but it was the tips that mounted up. Three or four dollars a day, maybe more. It was considered a good job but they stuck with it.

Bro: You mentioned your uncle last time, Walter Maddox, as an example of one Negro who was able to rise.

But: He was a timetable expert. He originated and created a timetable for the trains. He was the head man. He made the timetables up himself, how the trains should run, what schedules they went on, the destination and so on. That was his job. He created it himself. He worked right into ... When he retired they couldn't get anybody to take his place. After he retired they offered to pay him \$25 every time they called him to the office. They called him two or three times a month. He bought a ranch in a place called Orland, California. They would send a train down there for him. The train had a special car down there to bring him up.

Bro: Was he working down at Third and Townsend or was he working out of Oakland?

But: He was at the main office at Fourth and Townsend. The big building, great big red building, that was his office. Then they moved to Market Street. Market and Beale, between First Street. But Mr. Maddox, he worked himself up. He was used to ship timetables all around to different places. Smart. Some man took a liking to him and took him under his wing. And then, he outsmarted this man and got his job. He told this man what to do. The man got elderly and Mr. Maddox took his job. He could do a lot of good detail work and he knew just what to do and how to handle those trains. The railroads, they don't have a double track all the way going back East. They have just one track and they go about 75 - 80 miles and one track and sidings. He used to time those trains so they would meet at the same time. He originated that. Before, the trains would get there three or four hours ahead of time and have to wait. Now

But: they didn't have to wait at all -- he'd shoot them right through.

Bro: Was he the highest Negro in a job like that -- working for the railroads?

But: It was a good job but it wasn't good paying. He didn't make \$300 a month. Some guys get \$2,000 a month today. He originated the timetable. Some big company, I think New York Central, back east offered to give him five times as much money as he was getting here. But he didn't want go because he liked California and didn't want to go. But they copied his work. They copied his schedule.

Bro: Was he a native of San Francisco?

But: He was born in Sacramento, Walter G. Maddox. You see, I lost my first wife. I had a lot of pictures, a lot of stuff, but it all got away. I let them take it, it disappeared. My sister wanted this and wanted that and I didn't want anything. But Mr. Maddox I had some pictures of and I should have saved them but I didn't.

Bro: What was a good wage for a Negro during that time?

But: Seventy-five dollars a month was a good job. The cost of living wasn't what it is today. You can make more than \$75 a week now but they made \$75 a month.

Bro: How about for a woman, what was considered a good wage?

But: Forty, maybe fifty dollars; very few got it, though.

Bro: And what was that doing, domestic work?

But: Yes, domestic work.

Bro: Did Negroes have very many businesses in San Francisco?

But: No, barber shops, restaurants. Because the union was pretty tough on them. If you got a place you couldn't pay that rent because they'd hike the price of rent up on you. The Bill of Rights has done a whole lot of good. It was just prejudice, that's all. Just prejudice.

Bro: Do you remember some of those early Black barbers, like Gregory Hobson?

But: Who?

Bro: Gregory Hobson. Does that name ring a bell with you, H-o-b-s-o-n?

- But: Oh. Gregory Hobson. I knew Mr. Hobson. I haven't heard that name for many years. I don't know what he done. You see, it was when I was just a young kid. I remember him because he passed.
- Bro: Where were most Negroes living in San Francisco?
- But: The Western Addition. Do you know where that is, the Western Addition?
- Bro: That's where I lived most of my life.
- But: Yes?
- Bro: Yes.
- But: What part did you you live in?
- Bro: Buchanan and Eddy, the projects.
- But: If you want to go down there tonight on the way home, don't go by there. They'd knock your brains out, terrible. There never was such a thing as a holdup. You could walk every part of the streets unmolested. And in the last ten or twelve years, the influx that came here from the South, some of those bad Negroes who don't want to work, want it easy, they take the line of least resistance. They don't want to educate themselves, rob people, snatch purses. It's dangerous. When I was a kid, I used to box and I'd get around. But now I can't run and I can't fight and I just have to take it. Before that I didn't bar nobody. I would fight any man, White man or Black. I'd fight anybody. But I can't do it now. I'm too old.
- Bro: Were any Negroes living out on the avenues when you moved to San Francisco?
- But: There was only one family I knew who lived out on the avenues. Their name was Fancy Bourgh, she was a sporting woman. She had prostitutes. She ran a place down there on what they called the Barbary Coast; she had three or four places down there she used to run. But she had a house on 14th Avenue. About the only Colored person lived out this way. Fourteenth Avenue between Geary and Anza. Nice home, but she had money. And she was very fair, so nobody would know if she was white or colored.
- Bro: Could Negroes rent homes out on the avenues if they had the money?
- But: No. Of course, very few homes were for sale then. A few of them got in. Paid rent, \$25 or \$30 a month. You could get a nice place for \$30 a month and that wasn't considered a high rent to

But: pay. My brother, right after the Earthquake, he rented a place on Post Street near Fillmore and paid \$40 a month. He had six, seven rooms. He rented two rooms out. That was about the only way he could make it.

Bro: Your brother Tod?

But: Pardon?

Bro: Which brother are you talking about now?

But: His name was Howard.

Bro: John Howard Butler.

But: We called him Tod, that was his nickname.

Bor: Right.

But: He got a place. He was just lucky. After the Earthquake everybody moved on Fillmore Street. Businesses moved down Fillmore Street. All the business on Fillmore Street started booming. That's where all the life was. He was just lucky to get that place.

Bro: What did you do socially as a young man? What did Negroes do for social life?

But: Same thing they do now. Parties, dances. I had a cousin -- her name was Amy Johnson. She married a fellow who was a barber, who had a shop on Bush near Grant Avenue. But they just catered to White people. Amy was a musical composer. She played piano. Why, she was so clever that she could write music for a man who played the violin, a clarinet... you call them a composer, don't you?

Bro: Right.

But: A whole orchestra. She could set up a whole orchestra and give each one music to play, no matter which instrument you played, she was that good. She was a genius. Her daughter died here about two years ago. She lived on ... She could. She could give you a whole lot of detail. But she just had to take any kind of menial job. Today she would be a big star. She would have been a composer. Smart. They had concerts, you know, and they would always have her on the program. Amy Johnson. She could play classical beautiful and it didn't go to her head. She just give it up.

Bro: Did you ever attend any of the functions of the Cosmos Club?

But: Yes.

Bro: Tell me about those affairs. What were they like?

But: A Mr. Lashley -- have you heard that name?

Bro: William Lashley?

But: It was just a social club. They sent out invitations, you could wear your tuxedo, your nice costumes. It was very nice, nice orchestra, very nice.

Bro: What type of programs did they have?

But: It was just a dance. Everybody would be there, you'd socialize, talk, soft drinks, soda water and something like that. Have a good time, that's all. It stopped at twelve o'clock and every six months they'd have another one.

Bro: Was that an important social affair for Negroes in San Francisco to attend?

But: Among just Negroes, yes. Now you can go to the Fairmont, the St. Francis, any place you want to go. You can enjoy yourself, you can mingle. I had an uncle who used to live with me, his name was Bill, a nice man. He had a brother. Bill lived in my house on Pine Street. He bent his elbow, see. He could talk and he was a historian about San Francisco. He knew all the ins and outs. There was a place on Market Street he was always talking about. A place on Market Street, you go right down from the street into a basement and they had a bar down there. Well, Bill was kind of fair. He'd go in there, and one time he took a couple of dark colored men in to have a drink and the bartender looked at him and said no, they can't have a drink. You can have a drink. "That's all right, bartender. Give me a drink and if these two men can't drink, I'm not going to drink at all." So he poured three drinks out and they drank it, and after that he broke the glasses right in front of their faces. Smashed the glasses and said, "Don't ever come in here anymore." You had to say yes. You couldn't win.

Bro: Did you ever experience any situations like that yourself?

But: I was pretty fortunate. Sometimes I would have a little trouble but I was pretty fortunate. Because this man Shumate would always stand behind me. He told me, "If you ever have any

But: trouble you come in and see me"-- and he was a police commissioner.
We had Jim Rolph as mayor then and he worked under Jim Rolph.

Bro: Was religion important in your family at all?

But: I'll be frank and tell you no.

Bro: I want you to be honest now!

But: We'd go to church Sunday school, like that. We weren't what you call devout church-goers. We all went to Sunday school. Good people, but we weren't church-goers.

Bro: What church did you attend in San Francisco?

But: San Francisco? No church at all. I went to church in Oakland. Fifteenth Street Church. You know where that is? We all went there.

Bro: So you never did attend a San Francisco church?

But: Yes, I went to church, Reverend... I used to go there occasionally. But I never joined; which I should have but I never did.

Bro: Did you ever go to Purcell's place, or some of the old black cabarets?

But: Purcell's

Bro: Yes.

But: Sam King's?

Bro: Yes.

But: The Barbary Coast?

Bro: Yes.

But: (Laughter) Yes. I can see you've been talking to Dr. Leaner. We used to sneak over from Oakland over here. Did he tell you that?

Bro: Yes, he told me. What were those places like?

But: You said what were they like?

Bro: What were they like?

But: Well, take Purcell's. It was just like a regular saloon. It had a big long bar and the dance hall was right in the bar. They had girls there, and you could go and dance. While you were dancing, the waiter would come and say, "What do you want?" "Give me a rock and rye." "One rock and rye." They would ask the girl what she wanted. The girl would say, "Give me a rock and rye." But they would give her just a glass of water, but you had to pay for it anyway. Twenty cents, ten cents a drink, but she would just

- But: drink water because she couldn't drink liquor all night. About five minutes after they served the drinks, they'd start the music going again, and ask again what you wanted. They'd take about fifteen orders and they'd drink it right down but the girls always took that water. They got a percentage off that. Maybe they got a nickel for every drink they sold. But, you're married. They were prostitutes, too. You could go upstairs if you wanted but it was kind of risky. They didn't have the kind of sanitation they have now. You were likely to catch a disease or something. But my mother and father always forbid me from going to those places and having anything to do with those women.
- Bro: Do you remember a Lester Mapp who worked down there?
- But: Yes. After Purcell closed it up he took it over. He was pretty successful.
- Bro: What kind of person was he?
- But: Lester Mapp?
- Bro: Yes.
- But: He was a regular fellow. He was all right in that class. He was a bartender and a sporting man. He wouldn't do anything wrong. He wouldn't hurt anybody. If you were broke or needed some money, fifty cents or a dime to go across the bay, he would give it to you. He had a good heart, pretty good for the sporting life.
- Bro: How about some of the other places in San Francisco? I understand the Brooks family ...
- But: What?
- Bro: Did you know a Brooks family in San Francisco?
- But: Brooks?
- Bro: Yes.
- But: Yes, Brooks.
- Bro: Willie Brooks, his father had a place.
- But: Yes, Willie Brooks. Brooks took it a little bit different. He had kind of a dance hall, it wasn't much. He had a place down on Sutter Street. Kind of like Purcell's, but different. He didn't do very much.
- Bro: How about Jack's Place on Sutter?

But: That was after the Quake. I mean, that was during the War.

Jack's Tavern on Sutter Street, Sutter and Webster. My brother had an undertaking parlor right across the street. Butler's Funeral Home, Sutter and Fillmore. They did very well.

Bro: Did most of the people in the community go to that place? Was that the type of place that catered to a special type of person?

But: Anybody would go there as long as you had enough money to buy a drink. A drink would cost you no more than twenty-five cents. You come from out of town, tourists would come, spend two dollars, that was eight drinks.

Bro: What political affiliation were most Blacks in San Francisco?

But: Republicans.

Bro: Including yourself?

But: Yes.

Bro: What was Mayor Rolph like?

But: Mayor Rolph?

Bro: Yes.

But: Jim Rolph.

Bro: Jim Rolph.

But: Jim was all right. Of course, there weren't too many Colored people here and they couldn't throw the vote one way or the other. He'd just take you as you came along. If you wanted to support him, good, if you didn't that was fine with him. After I got to working with Shumate I got very well acquainted with Mayor James Rolph. When my son was born, I think he was three years old, my boss, Dr. Shumate, said, "Al, I want you to take two cases of champagne over to Mayor Rolph's house between one and one-thirty. And try to be there because he will be home to tell you where he wants it put." It was one of those houses on San Jose Avenue where you drive in one gate and then you turn around and go out the other gate. You make kind of a loop. So I drove in there and Shumate said, "Take Jimmy along, take your little boy along." He was just about three years old.

So I took him over there. As soon as we got out of the Cadillac, Rolph came over. "Hello there, Butler." He called me Butler. And I said, "Fine, your honor." "Who's that guy you have here?" I

But: said, "That's my son." "Your son - what's his name?" I said, "His name is Jimmy and I named him after you, your honor. James Butler and I named him after you." And gee, he walk swole up. Picked him up, took him in the house and he was in there about ten minutes and his wife, she brought him out. Gee, this is a beautiful little baby boy you got there. Jimmy, he was named after my husband." I said, "That's right Mrs. Rolph." He liked that. Before he left there, he put a ten dollar gold piece in Jimmy's hand and he said, "Now Butler, don't you take that. That's his." A ten dollar gold piece - not paper, but gold. So after that, Rolph and I were pretty good friends.

Bro: Did most Negroes in San Francisco like Mayor Rolph?

But: Yes, they liked him. He was all right. He didn't do much for them, a favor maybe, get you out of jail or something. But he was all right. Jim Rolph was all right.

Bro: Did Walt Sanford work for Rolph?

But: Walt Sanford.

Bro: Yes.

But: He didn't work for Rolph. He worked for the mayor's office.

Bro: I see.

But: He worked under Rossi, he worked for three mayors.

Bro: So he came along after Rolph died.

But: Yes.

Bro: How was he able to get that position?

But: A fellow named [unintelligible] had that job for a long time. He worked for Rolph, and I think Shumate and some other man got Walter that job. When folks would visit, say from New York or Boston, they had a bar there and Walter used to serve liquor, run errands. A valet, that was considered a good job.

Bro: Did Mayor Rolph have any Negroes working for him in his office?

But: He just had Walter Sanford, just a valet.

Bro: He was a messenger and errand boy.

But: Yes. When he catered for company, he would give them drinks.

Bro: Did you know Walter Sanford personally?

But: (Laughs) We were kids together.

Bro: Is that right?

But: Yes, he drove -- before that he was a chauffeur. I guess there

But: were about fifteen Negro chauffeurs in San Francisco. A lot of White people wouldn't hire a chauffeur because when they went out to these places here you couldn't eat. A big restaurant, they would either bring your meals out to your car or you would have to go back out to the kitchen to eat.

Bro: Do you remember some of the other Negro politicians in San Francisco?

But: Who?

Bro: People like Alberga, McLamore, Peoples.

But: I knew all them, Alberga, McLamore. When it came time for elections they would scout around getting White people the votes, and they would get ten or fifteen thousand.

Bro: Were they considered important people?

But: They could kind of get to the mayor, Board of Supervisors, Shumate, or get to me and I would tell Shumate.

Bro: Were they well respected among Negroes in San Francisco? The Negro politicians?

But: There were no Negro politicians. White politicians? You talking about White politicians?

Bro: I'm talking about Negro politicians.

But: Oh, no. These people weren't politicians. You couldn't call them politicians, because all they did was say vote for me and vote for that fellow there. I think I helped more Negroes out than in San Francisco than anybody as far as getting them jobs was concerned. I'm not bragging about it, but during the time I was working for Shumate I got a lot of colored fellows good jobs.

Bro: Did you know Alberga very well?

But: Oh, yes. He's pretty elderly now. Have you seen him lately?

Bro: Yes. Earlier this week. He's ninety-two.

But: Ninety-two.

Bro: And still in pretty good health.

But: Lives in West Oakland, doesn't he?

Bro: Yes. What kind of person was Alberga? What essentially did he do?

But: He was all right. He was what they call a rounder. He knew everybody. He'd glad hand, and was full of hot air, but he worked for a bail bond broker, Alberga did, and when someone got in a jam and wanted bail, he would come in and bail them out. He had that job a long time.

Bro: How about Wesley Peoples and William McLamore? What do you remember them doing?

But: McLamore wasn't much. But Wesley Peoples and Alberga, they used to travel together. We called them Amos and Andy. (Laughter) They used to ride around in a little old dilapidated Ford, just tooting along.

Bro: Do you remember the paper Peoples put out, the California Free Lance?

But: It wasn't much ... It just got by with the ads that he would get, but the circulation wasn't much. One of the first papers here was called the Western Outlook.

Two fellows named Joe Francis and Jack Derrick were the editors and Walter Maddox used to write articles for the paper. That was about the best colored paper in the city, before the Quake.

Bro: Was that the same Mr. Maddox who worked for the railroads?

End Tape 1, Side 1

Begin Tape 1, Side 2

Bro: Who do you remember as being the important Black leaders?

But: In San Francisco here?

Bro: In San Francisco.

But: We had a fellow here by the name of Dave Ruggles. Mr. Ruggles was pretty good, especially his wife. Dave knew everybody, he was very well respected and he had a menial job. I think Dave was a janitor some place. He knew his way around but, like most of us it was not our ability, but our color. A lot of Negroes had the ability, but your color would hold you back.

Bro: What other leaders do you remember as being important?

But: Walter Butler used to be pretty important. They would listen to him. But he never lived over here, he just worked over here. He lived across the Bay. Walter, he got around, he had a lot of influence with the colored people.

Bro: How were race relations in San Francisco?

But: What?

Bro: Race relations.

But: Well, like any place else, like New York or Boston or Philadelphia. If you had money, all right. If you didn't, why... But things

But: have changed now in the era since the Bill of Rights [Civil Rights Act] have been put through, things are changing and getting better every day for the Black man. I knew every Colored man that had a job in the financial district around Montgomery Street. I knew them all, but now when you go to a bank, you don't know all of them. You got tellers, secretaries, head of offices, you never seen that. We had a Mr. Bill Boliver. He worked for the Crocker National Bank. They loved him down there, but they never promoted him past errand boy. He set the ink wells out on the desks, pencils and so on, worked around the office at all kinds of menial jobs. He had it up here, but that was as far as he could go.

Bro: Was that true of most...

But: You laugh, and it sounds funny to you, but it's true.

Bro: Was that true of most Negroes, even the ones that were exceptionally bright, they just couldn't...

But: Well, take Mr. Boliver and my uncle Walter Butler. They were self-made men, experienced. Mr. Maddox, he didn't go to high school; but he was a brilliant man, he could talk. He knew Booker T. Washington, talked to him, and that's why he wanted to send me to Tuskegee, Alabama. I wasn't thinking about going. I should have, but I didn't. So Mr. Maddox and Walter Butler had a lot of juice.

Bro: How did Mr. Maddox come to meet Booker T. Washington?

But: Booker T. Washington visited San Francisco and when I was a kid Mr. Maddox one night took me, his wife, and his wife's sister, my Aunt Rudy, over on one Sunday night. They spoke at some big hall down on Post Street. That's how he came to know him.

Bro: Was there a big crowd there?

But: Oh, just jammed. White and Black.

Bro: You said you knew most Blacks down in the financial district. Did you know Joe Foreman?

But: He was a doorman who worked at Shreve's.

Bro: Right.

But: She just died here about a year ago, Mrs. Foreman. Did you meet her daughter?

Bro: Yes, I have.

But: What's her name?

Bro: Josephine.

But: Josephine.

Bro: What kind of fellow was Joe Foreman?

But: A gentleman. He was very courteous, gracious, had the uniform, with a nice smile. Chauffeurs used to drive their madams up there and stop in front of Shreve's. Joe would help the lady out. They called him Joe Shreve because he worked for Shreve's. "Hello there Joe Shreve, how are you?" Take a dollar out, a five dollar bill, and during Christmas he and the cop on Grant and Post had to get an express wagon to take home all the stuff people would give him. They would give him clothes, money, shoes, things for his wife and all that. Joe, he made money.

Bro: Was he well paid down there?

But: I guess Joe got about \$100 a month. But they liked him, they loved him. Those White women stopped in, rich people, talked to him and he was very amiable. Took them by the arm and helped them across the street; they liked that. "All right, Joe." Good-bye, Joe." They respected him.

Bro: How did San Francisco change as a result of all the migrants coming in during the Second World War?

But: Well, the Second World War, things were just beginning to pick up. My son got out of the army, went to University for two-and-a-half years and then came home, knocked around, and finally got a job. Of course, I wanted him to continue going to school, but he didn't want to do it and finally he got a job parking cars. Then he got a job at an insurance company downtown.

Bro: Do you remember all these migrants coming in during the War?

But: What do you mean, like foreigners, aliens?

Bro: No, I'm talking about Negroes coming in to San Francisco, What kinds of changes resulted with all those Negroes coming in?

But: Robberies, holdups, pimps, bootleggers, narcotics peddlers, everything that was dishonest and no good. A lot of them from Chicago, they came from the South through Chicago; then they come out here.

Bro: So it was essentially a bad thing for all these Negroes to come out here?

But: They make it bad for you. They make it bad for me. Once a month you look at your Colored newspaper and you see all these Colored preachers here, ministers, Colored, about three hundred here. What

But: good are they doing? Why don't they tell these Negroes how to conduct and handle themselves? But they don't say it. They're just looking for the money.

Bro: Did the job market open up as a result of the Second World War? Were Negroes getting any better jobs?

But: World War II?

Bro: Yes, World War II.

But: Oh no, just about the same. They kind of gradually got better. I would say that it's in the past fifteen years that things have begun to look up for the Negro here. Like I say, they got an education, they went to school, after the Bill of Rights a few of them did well and naturally they would recommend someone, and then that person would get a job, too. Where do you work, young lady?

Mary (Broussard's wife): I'm a teller at Wells Fargo, Stonestown.

But: I think I've seen you at California and Fillmore. Don't you work there?

Mary: No, Stonestown.

But: Oh, you work for Stonestown. Well, that's a nice job. You couldn't get a job like that before.

Mary: I'm quite aware of that.

But: I bet you respect it now.

Mary: Right.

But: You get the same privileges the Whites get. Back then, a lot of places you worked, you wouldn't get those privileges. They would slight you, you couldn't go to lunch with them. But now they all mingle.

Bro: Did most old San Franciscans feel the way you feel about the Negroes coming in?

But: If they conducted themselves all right, that was all right. We all liked them. But these burglars came in, these pimps and gamblers, and bootleggers, and narcotics peddlers. We didn't like all that.

Bro: Let me shift to your brother, John Howard. He was San Francisco's first Black funeral director, is that right?

But: Yes.

Bro: How did he get started in the funeral business?

But: I don't know. He just liked that kind of work. He just went over to Oakland and worked with a man named Hudson. It was Hudson and Butler over there. He did very well; Mr. Hudson liked him best. He knew all the Colored people, everybody over in Oakland; that's how they built the place up in Oakland. So Mr. Hudson told Tod, "We ought to have a place over in San Francisco. What is the matter with me buying your interest out and you going to San Francisco and I'll stay here in Oakland and I'll help you out until you get started." Which they did, so he did pretty well. He had about two funerals a week. He bought the Butler building, had two machines, did very well.

Bro: Did his wife help in the building at all?

But: After he died, she took it over, She had to hire a fellow named Finley. Finley took over. Finley died too, you know. Finley bought her out, but Finley wasn't the man. He didn't know it like my brother did. He was kind of slipshod.

Bro: Did John's wife work before he died? Her name was Alice.

But: I showed you her picture, didn't I?

Bro: Yes, you did.

But: She took over, but Finley did the work. She just conducted the business, arranged the pallbearers.

Bro: Was John making a lot of money for a Negro during that time?

But: Well, he did pretty well. On a thousand dollar funeral, he would make maybe \$750. Because the California Casket Company would sell you a casket cheap. Sell it to you for about \$100 and then you could take it and sell it to somebody for \$750. But he didn't take advantage of that. If you had a \$500 policy he would get you a casket for maybe \$100 or maybe \$50, and a burial place...

[Tape unintelligible]

Bro: You said Mr. Hudson taught him all he knew about the business.

But: About embalming. He had to go to school, but Hudson taught him the business. He worked about two years there, then he went to school, and then he set up his own business.

Bro: What were some of his earlier jobs before he started working in the funeral business? What type of work did John get into?

But: He worked at Crocker's the same as I did. He was a shipping clerk. That's how he got me the job. But the reason my brother and I stayed there so long is that Mr. Maddox had the timetables and they used to print them down at Crocker's, so they handled us with kid gloves. But we didn't get much money. We stayed at the same job. \$75 a month was good money in those days, but today you can make more than that in a week.

Bro: Is that what you made down at Crocker's, about \$75?

But: \$75 a month. It was considered a pretty good wage around 1915. Around that time you could get by.

Bro: I understand that John's wife Alice was a very "social" person?

But: Yes, she liked that.

Bro: Was she very much involved in social life of Negro women in San Francisco?

But: Yes. They had the Links. Have you ever heard of the Links?

Bro: No, I haven't.

But: I think she was president out here of the Links. A very... good socializer... very good organization. They would go from town to town. They would go around and meet all these different people and have a big dance, a big ball or something. All the officials were there. And she was in charge of the San Francisco branch.

Bro: Did you notice a distinct class structure among Negroes in San Francisco?

But: What kind of class do you mean?

Bro: In other words, did certain Negroes not associate with other Negroes because...

But: That happens every place. There were a lot of migrants.

I knew them, but I'd leave them where I found them. They treated me all right, I treated them the same. But there were a certain group of Negroes, if you got a job making more money than they did, they didn't like it.

Bro: Were there a lot of cliques?

But: Yes. A lot of cliques. I don't think it's as bad as it used to be. Like Mrs. Butler. There were certain Negroes she wouldn't associate with at all; if there was any funny business she wouldn't have anything to do with you.

Bro: Why wouldn't she associate with certain types of Negroes?

But: Same as you would. You wouldn't want to associate with some guy who was a pimp and a gambler and dealt dope out. Well, the same thing. She respected people, and she wanted to be respected by them. She didn't go for any funny business.

Bro: Let me shift over to your uncle, Walter Butler. He lived in Oakland, you said, but worked in San Francisco?

But: That's right.

Bro: You said he worked for an insurance company. Do you remember the name of that insurance company?

But: I'm not sure.

Bro: It's all right.

But: London, Liverpool and Globe Insurance.

Bro: What exactly did he do?

But: Just a menial job. Take messages and deliver them. "Get policy number 666 and bring it here," and "What does it say on there," and "Give it back to the filing clerk." It was a big company, too. He kept pretty busy, and he was there a long time. He had the same job. He had a desk, but he didn't have a desk where you could sit down. He had a high desk and, he had to sit on a stool.

Executives sat on a chair, but he had to sit on a high stool, with his legs out. They wouldn't let you sit behind a desk.

Bro: Did he ever get a better job than that?

But: After that the Depression came along, and Walter lost practically everything. Couldn't get a job. He had a little money lending business. He would loan you ten or fifteen dollars.

Bro: To Negroes, mostly?

But: Yes. He was doing pretty well, but when the Depression came, a lot of people out of work didn't pay him back, and that's how he went down. Nothing you could do about it.

Bro: And he was the first president of the NAACP over in Oakland?

But: I think Walter was.

Bro: Were you ever involved in that at all?

But: No, my brother was. Mr. Maddox, too. But Mr. Maddox had too many irons in the fire. He couldn't handle it. He was brilliant. In Contra Costa County, he was head of the school board. When he got up to make a speech, the words would just flow from his mouth. He knew just how to do it. A good orator.

Bro: Did Walter ever own any real estate in San Francisco?

But: No.

Bro: How about in Oakland?

But: He had a nice home in Oakland. He had to sell it. Depression came along and he had to get rid of it.

Bro: And he was in the real estate business, is that correct?

But: Money lending business.

Bro: Money lending. Now was he lending to White and Negroes or most just Negroes?

But: Mostly Negroes. He did pretty good. As I said, the Depression came along, and a lot of people lost their jobs and couldn't pay the money back.

Bro: Did the Depression hit Negroes pretty hard in San Francisco?

But: Well, it was pretty hard to get a job. A lot of people worked here and lived across the Bay; rents were so high here they had to live there and commute across the Bay.

Bro: Did you know anybody on relief in San Francisco? Any Negroes on relief?

But: Very few. Negroes, we got a job. Of course it wasn't relief that they got now. Anybody can go on relief now whether they need money or not. You couldn't do that then. During the Earthquake my father was a pullman porter. He ran Chicago, between Oakland and Chicago. People who lost everything they had over in Oakland were almost starving, weren't getting anything to eat. So my father used to bring home food -- hams, eggs. At some of the slaughter houses in Chicago you could get a ham for two bits, a great big ham. He'd get seven or eight hams, then he'd stop off in Nebraska and get fifteen or

But: twenty dozen eggs at ten cents a dozen. At our house in Oakland, the Earthquake knocked all the chimneys down. You couldn't do any cooking. You had to cook a fire in the back yard, so that's where we used to do all the cooking. We had a big house and a big back yard, and all the white neighbors around there came and ate with us. My father bought all these hams, bacon, eggs and stuff, and all these White people would help cook and clean up. That was a godsend.

Bro: Did your father do pretty well as a pullman porter during most of his life?

But: Yes, he did pretty well. He got a dray because of Mr. Maddox. He took the first electric lighted Overland Limited out of Oakland to Chicago and he got on the buffet car where they served liquors. Because of that he did pretty well.

Bro: Was he a pullman porter all his life?

But: No, not all his life. Not until they put this observation car on and could sell liquor. He was real popular. These big millionaires in San Francisco, like the Crockers, Huntingtons, the Bradleys -- there were about fifty big white families -- they'd want to know what train my father was going on. They'd say, "What are you doing maybe tomorrow, or Thursday, or Saturday? All right, I might want a train, so make reservations for us when you go out on the Overland Limited." Some of the states they went through -- like Iowa, Nebraska, Nevada, and I think Nevada, too -- they weren't supposed to sell liquor. But these men were so rich they couldn't do anything to them at all. So he made these southern drinks. What do you call them?

Bro: Mint julips?

But: Mint julips. He used to make them. He used to go out to the back yard, where we had a great big mint bush. He didn't sleep from the day he left Oakland until the day he came back. The only time he would sleep is when he would lay down and take a little nap. But these fellows were crazy about him. They would throw quarters and dollars at him.

Bro: Did your father ever own his own home?

But: He owned his own home, yes.

Bro: Did your mother work?

But: My mother was a spiritualist. She never worked. She just did that for a pastime. She was pretty good. She used to read the cards.

- But: In those days she made a little dough, extra money for herself. People liked her. I don't think that her predictions would come true, but she was nice. Kind of like an astrologist now, she could predict, she could tell you what was going to happen.
- Bro: Did either one of your wives work?
- But: My first wife, she worked, and my second wife worked too, for a while. Marriage didn't last too long, nine or ten years, with the second wife. But my second wife was up here two weeks ago to visit me. We didn't get along, so we just separated.
- Bro: What type of work did your first wife do?
- But: She was a stenographer. She was fair, she could pass. She didn't want to do it, but that was the only way to get a job then. If they found out you were Colored, you lost your job.
- Bro: Now there weren't very many Black women doing that then, working as stenographers?
- But: There were no Colored stenographers at all. But you would never take her for Colored. She was all right, but she wasn't prejudiced. If they found out she was Colored, they would let her go. But they don't do that now. Things have changed since Franklin Delano Roosevelt was President. He fixed the Bill of Rights and social security, and we have lots to be thankful for.
- Bro: Did most Negroes vote for Roosevelt? Did they shift to Democratic...
- But: Oh yes, they supported Roosevelt. A good man, Roosevelt, Johnson, and Truman, to my way of thinking done more for the Colored man than anybody, among Democrats.
- Bro: You remember Dr. Leaner you said because...
- But: We grew up together.
- Bro: He said that he and his father set up the first school of podiatry. Isn't that true?
- But: Chiropodist.
- Bro: Okay, right, chiropodist. Now he's a very fair man. Did he ever pass?
- But: Yes, he passed. He worked at the Olympic Club. He had that for years. He'd go down there between one and four, and he worked on those people down there. But they didn't pay any attention to him because he minded his own business.

Bro: Was the Olympic Club located along the Great Highway where it is now?

But: What?

Bro: Where was it located then?

But: The Olympic Club is located in San Francisco. It's on Post Street and it's still there.

Bro: Oh. I must be thinking of something else.

But: He's still got an old office on Shattuck Avenue but he's getting like me, a bit off, he can't remember.

Bro: Did he do pretty well as a professional?

But: Oh yes. He had all the work he could do. About the best in San Francisco. He had an office there. After he went to the Olympic Club, he'd go back to his office and see fifteen, twenty people a day. At a dollar and a half a foot, he made twenty-five, thirty dollars a day for years. His father was an expert.

Bro: How did his father get into the business?

But: I don't know.

Bro: I understand his father was a barber.

But: His father was just like a White man. You couldn't tell him.

Bro: I understand he was very good friends with Mayor Rolph.

But: Yes, he knew Jim Rolph.

Bro: Did Rolph know he was a Negro?

But: I don't know whether he did or not, but Rolph liked him. A lot of people didn't even think of him as White. He had a nice personality, minded his own business, was a nice talker.

Bro: You were living in Oakland during the Earthquake, is that correct?

But: That's right.

Bro: Did you come over to San Francisco after the Earthquake at all?

But: To get here -- yes, I came over -- you had to take a wagon. You had to go way down to San Jose. San Francisco is a peninsula. Here's Oakland over here, and here's San Francisco Bay over here, and right here are the boats going across to Oakland and San Francisco. Now, in order to get here, the only way to get here is to come over on the boat; but we went way down to San Jose the Oakland way, and came up to San Francisco by horse and wagon. They didn't have any automobiles then, very few automobiles, and that's the only way you could get back. You could take a ferry, but they wouldn't let you [Negroes] ride on that. One night another kid and I got underneath a great big express

But: wagon and hid underneath the blankets.

Bro: What was the city like right after the Earthquake?

But: It depended on where you were.

Bro: Is that right?

But: If you were on Market Street, or Mount Tamalpais, everything was just great big ruins.

Bro: What did Market Street look like?

But: You didn't know what Market Street was.

Bro: Is that right?

But: Just a lot of rubble. The biggest buildings were knocked down. The Earthquake didn't do the damage, the fire did the damage. We didn't have any water. All the water mains were broken. So they had to dynamite these buildings in order to keep these fires from spreading.

Bro: How were the citizens of San Francisco acting toward each other at that time?

But: They built it up right away. In a year's time, things were pretty well cleaned up. Then they started to build new buildings.

Bro: Did you go to the Panama-Pacific Exposition in 1915?

But: Yes. Over on Yerba Buena Island.

Bro: What was that like?

But: It was all right. A nice fair. The one in 1915, that one was here.

Bro: That's the one I was thinking of.

But: Oh yeah, I went, Crocker sent me. Fifty cents to get in. That was a nice fair. Better than the one over at Yerba Buena.

Bro: What do you remember about it?

But: Well, have you ever been to a fair?

Bro: Yes.

But: They just have exhibitions. They have theater, music and all like that. Art of all kinds, statues. It was good for the kids, it was nice. Nice grounds, music. Yes, the 1915 fair was a nice fair. But my boss, Mr. Martin, he said, "Al, do you want to go to the fair tonight?" I said, "Yes, Mr. Martin." So he gave me a

- But: pass to get in and the pass let you go in anything you wanted to go in. John Gil Martin, he was my boss. He was kind of a director there.
- Bro: Were people in San Francisco pretty excited about the fair?
- But: Oh, yes. Not only in San Francisco, but they came from all over the state, all over the country for a world's fair. The one that they had over on Yerba Buena Island wasn't so much because the boats -- you had to go over on the boats.
- Bro: Do you remember that picture "Birth of a Nation," when it came to San Francisco?
- But: I never saw it.
- Bro: You never saw it?
- But: I never saw the "Birth of a Nation." I could have gone, but I just didn't go.
- Bro: Why didn't you go?
- But: Just one of those things. I should have gone, but I didn't.
- Bro: Do you remember the commotion it made when it came to San Francisco?
- But: Oh, yes. Everybody was talking about the "Birth of a Nation." It was all over town. I should have gone, but I just didn't go. It was just one of those things. A lot of shows I should have gone to I didn't. Of course, it wasn't in color. Black and white. There wasn't any color then.
- Bro: What old-timers who grew up with you are still alive in San Francisco?
- But: That are still alive?
- Bro: Yes.
- But: No. There are only about four or five of us left that I know in my immediate surroundings.
- Bro: Who is still alive?
- But: Right now, I can't tell you who.
- Bro: When you look back over your long life, your long career, what do you look back on as being one of the most significant, important events in your life?
- But: The most important event in my life?
- Bro: Yes.
- But: I don't know. I've done so many good things and crazy things. I like to help people, I like to see people get along. If I can help anybody I'll do it, and I have been doing it all my life. That's

But: what I like to do. Of course, I come here to my room now. That's left to the younger generation. But my son here, he's doing pretty good. He helps us out and his wife's in the real estate business. Have you heard of Ella Mae Butler? She's a broker now. She can handle her own self now. She's doing pretty good. She doesn't take any dictation from the realtor. She's a broker and if she sells the house she gets all the money. Now when she sells a house she gets a commission.

End Tape 1, Side 2

Begin Tape 2, Side 1

Bor: Right before we were going out the door last time you told me that Walter Maddox helped get Garland Anderson and the other entertainer, Bert Williams, started in San Francisco.

But: Not Garland Anderson. George Walker.

Bro: George Walker? Right.

But: That's right.

Bro: How did he come to meet these gentlemen?

But: There were just a couple of young fellows going around and they went to the Barbary Coast. Mr. Maddox got acquainted with them there. They were always broke. He gave them a quarter, dime, fifteen or twenty cents, and told them to go down to that little theater on Powell Street -- "Little Theater." It's still there. They went down there and got a job singing, doing a little comedy. They worked there for a couple of weeks; got about eight dollars a week, something like that. Some big magnate from New York came out there and listened to them, and hired them just like that. So Bert and Walker packed up, had their expenses paid, and went back to New York and they were big stars. Bert Williams; he was a great comedian. I have a lot of his records. He was comical, dry, but you never heard anything about him except among the old-timers. There's a fellow now, a comedian, who tries to sing some of Bert's songs, but he sings them too fast. Only Bert could sing those songs.

Bro: Do you remember going to see Bert Williams as a young man?

But: Yes. I've seen Bert Williams. He was out here. He (Williams and Walker) had a whole troupe. Then he went back East and they joined the Zigfield Follies and then they took them on. But he was a big star there and made a lot of money. George Walker died young; he lived too fast. Bert lived kind of fast too; used to drink a fifth of brandy a day, they claim. I don't know because I never saw the man drink; that was after he left. The man had plenty of money and that's what he liked to do -- drink brandy and scotch. So I think that's what killed him. He died at the age of fifty-five.

Bro: He probably made his mistake by not mixing it with 7-Up.

But: (Laughter)

Bro: How did Mr. Maddox come to hook up with George Walker and Bert Williams?

But: Mr. Maddox was quite prominent when he lived in San Francisco here. He knew everybody, he was a well-educated man. He had that little paper called the Western Outlook. He got around; he lived right near the Barbary Coast on a street called Baker Street. That's how he got acquainted with Williams and Walker. They were rounders, and he got around and they knew him as a prominent man. As I said, he gave them a quarter, a dime, a nickel -- what he could afford. They were just a couple of knock-around kids, young men. They stayed around Powell Street and they were a big decided hit.

Bro: Right away?

But: Right away. And in about three or four weeks, like I said, a big theatrical man from the East heard them and took them right back to New York. Went over big.

Bro: Did you as a young man attend a lot of the social functions down on the Barbary Coast?

But: Who's that?

Bro: You yourself.

But: Oh, no. They didn't have any functions. You could go down there and bury your money, that's all, what little we had. I was no rounder. I went down there. Dr. Leaner and I would sneak over there. Mother wouldn't let us go. We told her we would just go

But: down the street to a show or something, but we would wind up there or the Barbary Coast. We would have a good time, but there weren't as many places to go as there are now.

Bro: What types of places were there to go for entertainment?

But: They had vaudeville, like at the Orpheus Theater. You could go there on a Sunday and for ten cents you would get a seat. At night, twenty-five cents up in the gallery. They used to change the program every week.

Bro: Did many Negroes attend those functions?

But: Of course they traveled. They had a circuit and quite a few colored comedians, but they didn't pay much money then and they didn't charge much admission. Now you go to a theater like that and you have to pay eight or nine dollars. Like the Circle Star Theater down there. I took my daughter and my grandson, and we went to the Circle Star to see Tom Jones. Packed that night.

Bro: Who were some of your early favorites in the vaudeville?

But: Bert Williams.

Bro: Bert Williams was your favorite?

But: He was comical. He was a great comedian. And Walker, he had finesse. He used to dance, clown around, he would dance. But Bert Williams never smiled, kind of cool. He had a deep voice and talked very distinctly with a southern accent. He just put that on because he was Jamaican, but he was good.

Bro: Was he popular with Whites as well as Negroes in San Francisco?

But: Oh, yes. He came out here two or three times after a period of three or four years. Packed them in. Bert Williams. Williams and Walker.

Bro: I'm going to go back to your childhood. I would like you to tell me about your parents, your mother and your father. What do you remember distinctly about both your parents?

But: I remember distinctly. What do you want to know about them?

Bro: Did your parents tell you stories as a young person about their lives?

But: My father never did. He was on the railroads. We didn't see him too often. He was kind of a quiet man, but very liberal. Like I said, during the Earthquake he brought a lot of food out from Chicago to feed these people, White people all around the neighborhood. And all the people knew the Butlers. All those

But: Irish people, they all helped, which they were glad to do. We had to eat in the backyard; we built a stove out of bricks to cook the meals on, because they wouldn't allow you to cook in the house. The Earthquake knocked all the chimneys down, so we had to eat in the back yard, fry and cook the best we could. People were thankful to get that food too. But in our immediate neighborhood we had no trouble. Around where we lived everybody knew the Butler family. Everybody.

Bro: Did your father ever tell you stories about when he was a boy growing up in Baltimore?

But: No. If he did I don't remember. My oldest brother was an undertaker. Butler's Funeral Home -- he was my brother. He and my father were very close. My father treated me like a kid; he didn't tell me too much. But he and my brother were very close. And Mr. Maddox, he was close to my father, too. Southern Pacific, and beside Mr. Maddox worked for the S.P. and he would tell my father something and they all knew my father knew Mr. Maddox. And Mr. Maddox knew the higher ups, and he got a lot of favors done for him, see.

Bro: Did your mother ever tell you stories about her life?

But: Oh, not too much. If she did, I forgot. But my mother was a good woman, I know that. She raised the kids well. I went to school, clean, let us alone, played around. Let me do anything I wanted to do. I was the sickest one in the family. I was sickly. Had malaria. I was thin. They used to cry over me, thought I was going to die. And I'm the only one living out of maybe three hundred of them. They're all gone. My mother's people, my father's people, my sisters, brothers and cousins are all gone. In my era, I'm the only one that's living. Dr. Leaner and I are the only two left in our group that went around together. About two or three hundred fellows are all gone. Some got lost in World War 1 and others just died. But my suggestion, or my theory is, I never drank.

Bro: Not as a young man?

But: I didn't like whiskey. I drank a little sweet wine once in a while but I had it on the sideboard. In the kitchen we had a

But: sideboard and they had liquor. They used to put it in canteens, fancy glass bottles. If you wanted a drink, they told you to go up there and help yourself. They told my mother, "We're going to fix these kids so they never want any/whiskey." They poured us out a big shot of whiskey and they said, "Now drink that. You want it, now drink it." We drank it down and almost strangled. Never had any use for whiskey after that. Never touched it. On the sideboard, never touched it at all. I had an uncle, Uncle Charlie, he was a booze hound. He used to go over my folks and order a great big slug. My father and he would get in an argument. He says, "What are you trying to do, drink all that up? Leave some -- have some and leave some." He says, "Where did you get this?" He says, "What do you care where I got it all. You're drinking it, aren't you?" "Gee, why this is good." He would drink a whole pint or a whole fifth and think nothing of it. I never drank whiskey. But my group, all nice fellows, but they drank. Most of them. They all died. We all have to die sometime. Some died young. Some died older. But I think whiskey was the thing most of them died from. Liquor. So you can't beat it. That's why I'm still here. Dr. Leaner, he doesn't drink. We never did drink whiskey. Now that's what I attribute it to. Most of them died from alcoholism.

Bro: Did a lot of Negroes drink during that period of time when you were growing up?

But: Oh, yes. You could buy a drink and it would only cost you a dime; they'd put the bottle there and you'd pour it out yourself. They used to pour out a great big slug, but now they don't do that. They pour it out for you and set it before you. Just about a tablespoonful for fifty or seventy-five cents. That's all you get. And rotgut at that. Bad whiskey. They call it rotgut. It would eat up your kidneys, your bowels and everything else.

Bro: Did you have a grandmother living with you when you were growing up?

But: Yes, I had a grandmother. My grandfather was a Philadelphian. A Mrs. R.V. White. She was half Cherokee Indian. Nice little person, smart and very brilliant, and she used to like to recite poetry. She taught me something. I never forgot it. That was many years ago when I was a kid. She talked with that English accent, she said, "Perhaps you all will remember that it was in

But: Virginia that Captain John Smith and his people built the first English town in America. This same Virginia, no more than exactly one hundred years later was the birth place of George Washington, whose memory was the pride of the whole country." But that's all I can remember.

Bro: That's pretty good.

But: But I never forgot that. She was very -- she was smart, Grandma White.

Bro: Do you remember what year she was born?

But: She died at the age of eighty-nine. No, I don't.

Bro: Was she a slave by any chance?

But: No, she wasn't a slave. She wasn't. I don't know whether her ancestors were. Her husband's name was Alfred J. White. I was named after her husband -- Alfred J. and he had the first Colored barber shop in San Jose. My mother lived down there too. That's where he was a barber. About thirty years ago my boss and I drove down there and the barber shop was still there right on the corner. Barber Shop, no name, Barber Shop. And right next door was the bank, right on the corner.

Bro: Do you remember what corner that is, what street that's on?

But: I know it's on the main street. I think Santa Clara, the main street in San Jose, Second or Third. Right on the corner. It was the first barber shop in California and a Negro barber shop at that. He had two Colored barbers there, but he was a man who looked like an Indian. We had his picture. I don't know what's become of it, all that stuff. We had lots of [unintelligible]. I haven't got any of it.

Bro: Did your grandmother ever recite stories to you about her life or just stories in general?

But: If she did, I've forgotten them. I was a kid always on the go, sickly, and I didn't pay much attention to them. But I remember when I was going to school and we had to talk about past Presidents and she told me about George Washington. I never forgot it.

Bro: You said your grandmother wrote poetry. What kind of poetry did she write?

But: Well, she didn't write it, she just recited it. I don't know where she got it from, but she remembered it. She had a good memory. She used to help us with our school work, like fractions

- But: and decimals. If we couldn't do it, she'd get a pencil and do it. And at that time she was a woman up in her late seventies. She had a good memory and was very smart, very intelligent, Grandma White.
- Bro: Was she an educated woman herself or was this something she just picked up?
- But: She went to school back East in Philadelphia. She was smart, a great reader. She could take a newspaper and read it right through and tell you just what it said. All the news, politically, socially, and economically. Read it, stuck right here. She and Mr. Maddox used to have arguments, talk to one another, and he liked her, too. They used to get in arguments, like you see someone interrogating the presidents, that's how they interrogated one another.
- Bro: Did you spend a lot of time home as a young man?
- But: Who?
- Bro: You.
- But: Oh, yes. I knew where to go to get something to eat and a place to sleep. My mother was good to us. We never had a key to the front door. The front door was always open. Never knew what a key was. Come in at any time at night. Just open the door and come on in. We never locked anything up.
- Bro: You said your father was pretty liberal. Was your mother the one that disciplined you -- the parent that disciplined the kids?
- But: Oh, yes. John Butler was liberal. Did I show you those pictures?
- Bro: Yes.
- But: He's on there. Liberal, generous, and a good heart. If there's a heaven, he's there. He's there.
- Bro: Was your mother stern in place of your father?
- But: Huh?
- Bro: Was your mother stern? In other words, you said your father was very liberal.
- But: Yes, my mother was liberal, she was generous, she helped a lot of people out. Anybody. On Sundays they'd have a great big dinner almost every Sunday. All the relatives came; some of the in-laws helped cook. We didn't have any gas or electricity then, we used wood coal for fires. You don't remember those days do you?

Bro: That was a little before both of our times.

But: (Laughter) No radio, no television, all we had was a piano and my cousin was a good player. She used to come over every Sunday and play the piano. We had one of the first pianos in Oakland. We bought an upright piano called a Steinway upright.

Bro: Could you play it yourself?

But: No, I don't play it.

Bro: What was that first home like over in Oakland?

But: Where I was born and lived?

Bro: Right.

But: Nice home, it had everything we wanted in those days. Not like it is now. There was no electricity. We used to have coal oil lamps. So you had to wash those chimneys every day. That was part of the chores of the lady of the house. We had a lamp for each room, big lamp, then one for the wall. Then the tank in it had coal oil, kerosene. We were satisfied.

Bro: Was it a fairly large place?

But: Well, we had a good size place. We had seven rooms in this house. We lived on Brush and 22nd in Oakland. The old place is still there. That's where I was born. The neighborhood is all different now. It's all broken up and run down. But we had a nice lawn around the house, nice trees on the streets. It was nice, beautiful. But now it's terrible.

Bro: You didn't have any sisters, did you?

But: I had three sisters.

Bro: And how many brothers?

But: Two brothers. My oldest brother, he turned out to be an undertaker. Butler's Funeral Home, you know where that is. Well, he originated that. He was over in Oakland. Hudson and Butler. So Mr. Hudson stayed in Oakland but my brother came over here. Opened up on Sutter Street. He done very good.

Bro: How about your sisters, what ever happened to them?

But: My oldest sister, she married a fellow named Robert Gilmore -- a soldier in the Spanish-American War. She married him and they settled down. They had a nice family and two of her daughters died just this year. One died about two months ago, her name was Margaret, and the other one died six months before her.

But: And all the boys are gone but one. The one I never liked. He was one of those wise guys who knows everything. You don't know nothing, he knows everything. "You ought to do this, why didn't you do that. You ought to have better sense." Now he was the one that had no sense in my way of thinking. So he's the only one that's left. The others were all fine and all good. I got along fine.

Bro: Were you close to your brothers and sisters?

But: Yes. We were a close family, very close. They were all good. I can't say nothing bad about none of them.

Bro: Were you close to your brother John?

But: My brother?

Bro: Yes.

But: Oh, yes. We worked together, H.S. Crocker Company. He was a shipping clerk and I was a stock clerk. He got me there and he was there a while. But the only reason that I got the job there was because Mr. Maddox worked for the S.P. and Crocker used to print the timetable. It was about a \$300,000 job to print all those timetables twice a year; and he was the head of that. So we got respect, but as far as it went, we stayed in the same place. He was shipping clerk, and I was the head stock clerk.

Bro: Did you ever see any copies of those timetables while you were working down at Crocker?

But: Sure. We saw all that. We saw them printed. When they changed the major routes -- like the southern route, or the northern or eastern -- all the local schedules would have to be changed, too. Maddox did all that. It would take the printers six weeks to set the press up to get it ready. He would go around there every day to make changes.

Bro: Did he work down at H.S. Crocker?

But: No. He went back and forth. He used to hike it too, all the way down there, about fifteen blocks. Walk down there, walk back. Come around in the afternoon about two o'clock, stay there for about a couple of hours, look around, tell the printer to take this off, scratch that off, that's wrong, that's not right, we don't want that. Made a difference when he would tell them what to do. But when guys would get sore, they would loaf, they could do anything else they wanted but work.

But: But when he said go, that was it. Everything was right. Let her go. It would take them three weeks to print it, and you know that's a lot of timetables.

Bro: Did he talk to many Negroes besides yourself and your brother about printing the timetables and what he was doing?

But: Mr. Maddox was very close-mouthed. He didn't. He was very business-like. He was a man who wanted to be left alone. He would ride back and forth on the ferry boats, sit in a certain place, read the paper. Fellows would say, "Hello, Mr. Maddox, hello, Walter." He would nod and keep reading. He was a nonchalant sort of a man, good guy, nice fellow.

Bro: Did he tell you what he was doing with the timetables all along, as soon as he began?

But: Oh, yes. He knew me. I was sickly and at a place called Steague. You know where Richmond is?

Bro: Yes, I do.

But: Steague was this side of it, an old little town, Steague, and so she sold him five acres. He paid for it maybe ten dollars a month, and he built a house down there and he lived there and they had a horse and car. They had a couple of cows -- I used to milk the cows. He raised me and I used to drive there, from Steague to West Berkeley about three miles, horse and cart every morning. I did that for about three years and I was just a little kid. Nine years old. I would take him and then I would come back, unleash the horse, and then I would get ready and go to school. I did that for three years. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be here now, because I was out in the open, I could play ball, run around; and they gave me a lot of milk and nice food. Gee, I picked right up right away. I stayed down there about six years. But I drove back and forth for three years, horse and cart. Rain or shine, hot or cold. And coming back at night, the train would come around West Berkeley at six o'clock and just shut your eyes, it was so dark, but the horse knew the way home. Do you know San Pablo Avenue in West Oakland?

Bro: Yes, I do.

But: You just go around San Pablo Avenue, three miles, then we turned

- But: to the left and we went up to a place called Steague. When we got ready to turn off, we went up about a mile and we saw just that one light. That was the house where we lived. My aunt had kind of a high house; she would light the light and we could set the direction by that. Muddy little horsey, but she made it.
- Bro: What were some of your responsibilities at home when you were living at home, in terms of work?
- But: Nothing, just a school kid.
- Bro: Your parents didn't assign you special jobs to do around the house, wash the dishes...
- But: No, I was a sickly kid then and I didn't do anything. I'm ashamed to tell you that, but I didn't do much. My sisters did all the work, but they all kind of pampered me because I was kind of sickly. But I got along all right. I liked to play. After I went down to Steague, I picked right up. I came right back and went to school, of course. I went to Oakland High School. The last two grades I didn't go through. I quit and got a job at Crockers, and I never went back.
- Bro: Now, why did you stop school?
- But: I wanted to work. My parents wanted me to go to school, but I just wouldn't do it.
- Bro: Were your parents upset when you stopped going to school?
- But: Yes. My mother got after me, but it didn't do any good. Dr. Leaner and I got jobs as bellboys in San Francisco hotels. In one hotel we worked, he ran the elevator and I was the bellboy. Hop bells, answer the bells. We'd make a couple of dollars a day. Tips. And every night after seven o'clock we used to take water pitchers up to the different rooms -- sixty-five or seventy-five pitchers of ice water. It took an hour-and-a-half to do all that. Everybody would give you a dime or a nickel. Some would give you two bits or a quarter. Every night. You had to wash these pitchers and put a piece of ice in them and take them upstairs and people would be glad to get them.
- Bro: Dr. Leaner told me he made fifty to a hundred dollars a day sometimes in tips.
- But: Well, you did. Of course, he worked at the Russ House, a big white

But: Building. That's after he and I -- he went to work, but I lived in Oakland. We quit this hotel that I was just telling you about; and he worked for the Russ Building, a big commercial hotel. He made a lot of money there, good money.

End Tape 2, Side 1

Begin Tape 2, Side 2

Bro: What I'm getting at, Mr. Butler, when you and your brother acted up, misbehaved, which parent spanked you? Which parent disciplined you?

But: They didn't... we didn't... My mother favored me of course, because I was sickly, but my brother, he was good to me. He was quite a few years older than I was. They treated me all right, treated me too good, ought to have jumped on me a bit.

Bro: Was your father gone from home a lot because of his job on the railroad?

But: Yes, he shot to Chicago. He would stay there for two days, and ride back again, back and forth.

Bro: Did he do that all of his life?

But: First he was a porter, a pullman porter, and then they put the Unlimited on. They put that buffet car on, you see, where they served liquor. They put him on that, and that's where he made his money.

Bro: How about later on in life? Did he still work for the railroad?

But: They retired him at -- he worked up until he was seventy. He got kind of sickly, couldn't make it, so he retired. He got about forty dollars a month pension, that's all.

Bro: Did he earn enough money when he was working to buy his own home and everything?

But: Yes, sure, he bought his own home. Pullman porters made pretty good money. My father earned pretty good money. He had a good job. The wages were only about forty dollars a month, had to buy your own uniform, had to buy your own food. It was tough, but the tips were what you lived on. He'd come in on the Overland Limited

But: with maybe forty-five or fifty dollars every ten days or so.

Bro: Did your mother work at all during her whole life?

But: No.

Bro: Never worked outside the home?

But: No, we got along good. We did all right. Plenty to eat, everything was nice, had everything we wanted.

Bro: You mentioned last time we talked that one of your wives did work as a stenographer at one time.

But: My first wife.

Bro: Did your second wife work at all?

But: Yes, my second wife went to college, went to high school and took a business course. She was a typist. She was good. She died at childbirth.

Bro: Do you remember Mary Ellen Pleasant, Mammy Pleasant, as a young man? What do you remember about her?

But: No, I don't remember her. No, no. My father-in-law -- the first wife's father -- knew Mammy Pleasant very well. Some White lady came, an author, and she wrote a book with his knowledge with what he told her, but she didn't give him a dime. Nothing.

Bro: Really?

But: Nothing. She got rich off the book herself. Think it was something like two or three hundred thousand copies. Didn't give him anything. The book sold like hotcakes. That was the first book ever written about Mammy Pleasant. He showed her everything.

Bro: Did Negroes talk about Mammy Pleasant a lot when you were growing up?

But: No. I slightly remember. No. Of course, I was over in Oakland most of the time, but he told me he knew all about her. He talked to her. She was a very strong woman. She was smart -- Mammy Pleasant. Brilliant. All the politicians would come to her for advice. White politicians.

Bro: Do you remember anything else your father-in-law told you about her?

But: No. We didn't converse on her very much, only when that woman came. She came here in the afternoon -- she was smart. Nobody was in. He lived with me, see. He lived at my house.

Bro: Do you remember your father-in-law's name?

But: What?

Bro: Your father-in-law's name?

But: No, I don't remember the woman's name.

Bro: The name of the man who lived with you, and gave out the information.

But: Mr. Rist.

Bro: Mr. Rist?

But: Eugene Rist. E-u-g-e-n-e- Rist. I think my brother's got his picture. I had it, but I can't find it. He was a very nice man. Self-made. Had a hotel here called the Baldwin Hotel, years ago. He was the headwaiter there. He was a nice man, quiet. He was a waiter on the diner, and then he got tired and quit, and then I got him a job -- my boss had four or five apartment houses -- in an apartment house paying eighty dollars a month and his room. But then he got kind of [tape unintelligible]. Eyes went bad. He got kind of [unintelligible] so we had to let him go. So he came to live with me on Pine Street. I gave him a back room there, and just let him live there.

Bro: Did you ever own any property over on Pine Street?

But: No, I rented. I should have bought the place, but I never did. I wanted to buy it once. A white lady had it who I rented from and she said, "Mr. Butler, why don't you buy this place, I'm getting old." She said, "You can get it for \$25,000, three flats. You pay \$25.00 a month, that's \$75 a month income." I didn't have that kind of money in those days, see. She said, "You can give me anything down. Give me \$200.00 down and just pay the rent off to the bank." I couldn't even do that.

Bro: How long ago was that?

But: 1927.

Bro: When you bought this home, was that the first time you ever owned property?

But: Well, I had a couple of places over in Oakland. I started to buy here, but I never did. Taxes were too high, so I never bought anything.

But I should have bought that house there after they offered it to me, but I just didn't do it. It was right near my work and I got in the old groove, just went back and forth easy. I was used to paying \$25.00, the rent, and the old house had eight

- But: rooms, four bedrooms. My father-in-law, he had the back one. And a fellow, he was a waiter, he had the one in the front. I took the front bedroom and there were about six of us at one time.
- Bro: Were you sharing the rent or were you just paying the rent yourself?
- But: Most of it I didn't charge anything. But towards the last, Mr. Rist paid a little bit. About ten dollars a month. A man named Mr. Thomas paid ten dollars a week. That helped out a little bit, but sometimes they paid, and sometimes they didn't.
- Bro: Were they like lodgers, or were these just friends staying with you?
- But: They lived there, roomed there, and did their own cooking. Mr. Rist used to be around the kitchen, made salads and things. After my wife and I divorced, he did all the cooking and bought all the groceries and cleaned up everything, and I didn't do anything. Just came home, ate and slept and went out. That's all I did.
- Bro: Did you ever take in lodgers, even during the War?
- But: Oh, no. No.
- Bro: What were most Negroes paying for rent about that time, twenties, early thirties? You said you were paying about \$25.00
- But: That was about the average, about \$25. Some paid \$15. \$25 got you a big house. And the woman liked me. I used to drive the cars. I would take her downtown, wherever she would want to go, and she took a liking to me. Then, after she sold that place, other people took it over and they raised my rent right away. Paying fifty dollars I think. Right after that I was paying seventy-eight.
- Bro: Do you remember Negro women being very active in politics in San Francisco?
- But: Only one woman I know. Her name was Mrs. Ruggles, Mrs. David Ruggles. You ask some of these old-timers and they will give you her name. David Ruggles. Mrs. Ruggles was very smart in politics and Dave was pretty good in politics, but not like her. She was a working woman, Mrs. Ruggles, and they bought a nice house on California Street. California between Scott and Divisadero. A nice two-story house. I was just looking at it the other day. They just painted it. She lived there, she and Dave.
- Bro: Did you know Dave personally?
- But: Oh, yes. She died, then he passed. But she was a good politician.

But: They all liked her, intelligent. She didn't carry on like some of these Negroes do. She was honest and on the up and up.

Bro: Are you speaking of Mrs. Irene Bell Ruggles? Are we speaking of the same woman?

But: What?

Bro: Was her first name Irene -- Irene Bell Ruggles?

But: Maybe it was. You've heard that name?

Bro: Yes, I have.

But: Her husband's name was Dave. Dave Ruggles.

Bro: Did you know Dave as a young man, or was he older than you?

But: Well, he was an elderly man then. But Dave always worked. I don't know what Dave did. I think he was a janitor somewhere. He was a janitor, Dave was. But she was good. She kept things going. She died, then Dave sold the house and went to Los Angeles.

Bro: What kind of activities was his wife involved in?

But: Well, she worked for some rich white people, I think. I don't know, but on the side, she was in politics. People respected her because she had it up here. She liked it. An old San Franciscan. She knew all the ins and outs. Knew all the head politicians. You would see her down at City Hall, she would be talking to this one and that one. She never went in for any work to be done in politics. But during election time she would always get out and help the politicians and tell them what to do.

Bro: Do you remember a woman by the name of Ada Wilson?

But: Ada who?

Bro: Ada Wilson.

But: Ada Wilkinson?

Bro: No, Ada Wilson.

But: Wilkins?

Bro: No. W-I-L-S-O-N.

But: Wilson?

Bro: Wilson.

But: Yes, I knew a lady named Wilson. An old-timer. I think I did. Lived in San Francisco here.

Bro: Yes.

But: I heard that name but it slipped my memory.

Bro: How about a Mrs. Willa Evans?

But: She's still alive. Lives on 24th Avenue, 25th Avenue. I sent her a postcard yesterday. Related to Bob Evans. Bob was a seafaring man here, ran a boat. Went to sea. I think Bob worked for the government, too, on one of the transports. Yes, Bob did.

Bro: Bob is dead now?

But: Yes.

Bro: Do you know much about his wife at all?

But: You ought to go and see her and tell her I sent you. Do you know the number?

Bro: No, I don't.

But: 524 24th or 25th Avenue. I think it's 24th Avenue. Just mention my name. She'll tell you she knew me, and my brother and my brother's wife, Alice Butler. Of course, she was older than I, but she knew them better than I did.

Bro: Were Negro women very active in political affairs?

But: No. Just a few like Mrs. Ruggles and a couple of others. Mrs. Ruggles, she was the leading one, active in politics.

Bro: Were Negro women active in social affairs?

But: Well, in their own race, yes. Like my sister-in-law, Mrs. Butler, she had the San Francisco end of the Links. They looked forward to her to make the first move in socializing. She knew them all.

Bro: How have Black women changed from when you were growing up until today?

But: Well, to tell you, they have a better opportunity. Like your wife works at a bank. Anything they're capable of doing they can do. The Bill of Rights fixed that up. They have got to give you a job or help you out, anyway, if you're capable. Can't be any discrimination. Of course if you have the ability to climb, it's up to you.

You can get a job as a secretary, manager. Things have changed five hundred per cent.

Bro: Are the attitudes of Negro women any different today than when you were growing up?

But: Of course, I don't get around like I used to, the young women

But: today, they're all right. They can make it. You go to school, you go to high school, you go to college, you go to business school, you get a chance to improve yourself, you get a job. In those days, whether you had an education or not, or had ability to do anything, you couldn't get a job. Outside of being a maid or something like that. Just couldn't do it.

Bro: Were you ever a Mason or an Odd Fellow?

But: I was a Mason.

Bro: When did you first join the Masons?

But: Dallas, Number 25. That was over in Oakland. I got in through my brother. But I never liked lodge work. There's too much dissension in there. Everybody wanted to give orders and they didn't want to do anything. The best job they gave me was a tiler on the door. Do you know what a tiler is?

Bro: No, not really.

But: A tiler. They give certain raps, you open the door and let them in. That's the job they gave me, and I didn't like it. And I sat in the anteroom, a little cubbyhole, and I would open the door and let them in, announce them, shut the door, and wait for someone else to come. But there was always hate and dissension. My brother-in-law, he was working for master. He liked it, I didn't. Then I joined the Knights of Pythias, just because he wanted me to do it. I stayed there a couple of months and then got out of there, too.

Bro: Were lodges important for Negroes when you were coming up?

But: Just their own. Masons weren't even recognized. Just the colored. So that's why I got out. They weren't doing anything but sit and talk and argue. Everybody wanted to be the head, make suggestions, tell you what to do and what not to do. I was not a lodge man, but my brother, he liked it. And it helped his undertaking business too.

Bro: Did the lodges get involved in community affairs?

But: Oh, they give a dance, a ball, raise a little money. Would give a dance, raise about forty-five to fifty dollars, put it into the treasury. No, they would have a picnic or something, things like that. No, things have changed. It's all different. The churches did most of the social activities. Like the 15th Street A.M.E. Church over in Oakland. They would have a picnic, a holiday outing some-

But: where, very nice. But they don't do that anymore. They don't get up for that.

Bro: Do you remember Reverend Byers that worked over here?

But: Reverend who?

Bro: Byers.

But: I remember that name, Byers.

Bro: You don't remember him personally?

But: No.

Bro: Were you insured by a Negro insurance company?

But: No. Metropolitan. Metropolitan insured all the Negroes. In fact, they wouldn't take Negroes in any other company. You had to have a pretty good background and good standing, and then if you could afford it, you could get in Prudential or some other big fire insurance company. But Metropolitan, they had them all.

Bro: Were you ever turned down by another company?

But: No, I always belonged to Metropolitan. I had a paid up policy. When I got married the second time, I drew it all out. Something like three hundred dollars. Then I stayed out. Then I got [in] another Colored company. What's that Colored company in Los Angeles?

Bro: Golden State?

But: Golden State. I joined that, but the agent, he wasn't much good. He didn't collect, kind of funny. I don't know whether he turned the money in or not. So I just dropped out.

Bro: Did you know many Negroes who owned property in San Francisco?

But: At that time few, but not too many. Ruggles was one and there was another. No, not too many. I guess there were, but I didn't know them. A lady named Mrs. Flippin, she owned a home. In later years, there were a few people who bought their own homes in San Francisco. But most people went across the Bay over to Oakland.

Bro: Why was that? Was it cheaper over there?

But: Well, the property was cheaper. I bought a house in Oakland when I first got married, on 59th and Telegraph Avenue. You know where that is?

Bro: Yes, I do.

But: 59th and Telegraph. It's the second house from the corner, a little white house. I paid \$300 down. Of course, I thought it was

But: all the money in the world. Paid the down payment, and paid \$25 a month. After I lost my first wife, I got rid of it. I sold it. I didn't make anything out of it. After I had to pay my taxes and all that, I didn't make anything out of it.

Bro: You told me last time that you grew up with Walter Sanford, you knew him as a kid.

But: Oh, I didn't grow up with him. I just got acquainted with him when I came to live in San Francisco.

Bro: I see.

But: He was a chauffeur and so was I. That's how I got acquainted with him.

Bro: Do you remember who he worked for at that time?

But: Who he worked for?

Bro: Yes. As a chauffeur.

But: Yes, I know the lady but, gee, I can't recall her. She's dead now. He had what they call a town car. You sit out in the open. You've seen those cars, they don't have them any more. She sat in the back. He was out in the front, cold, driving this lady around. I can't think of her name.

Bro: Was she a wealthy...

But: Oh, very wealthy. She was good to him, but she was tough on him. He had to work all hours of the night. He had to drive her down to the peninsula all the time to functions down there. Sometimes he'd get home two or three o'clock in the morning and had to get up and go to work the next day.

Bro: Do you know much about his early background, his education?

But: No, I don't know much about Walter. Walter, he was born in the islands, the West Indies. A West Indies man.

Bro: Do you remember where he was living in San Francisco?

But: Where he's living now -- 1330 Baker Street. He bought that home. He was one of the first to have a home. In fact, in that area, a lot of Colored people bought homes, small homes, and he was one of them.

Bro: Did his wife work, to your knowledge?

But: I think she worked too, at that time. But he had a son named

But: Walter Junior. Walter wasn't right. Got to fooling with that stuff, you know. Walter had a good start, his father got him started. He worked in a bank, and he had a good job there. But it went to his head. He got to fooling around with dope, and that was it. He was an addict.

Bro: Do you know exactly what kind of work Walter did with the mayor in the mayor's office?

But: Kind of a valet. He was a valet, you know. They would have visitors coming, run errands, messenger boy.

Bro: He didn't work in an office behind a desk?

But: Oh no, just errands.

Bro: So he wasn't really an educated man.

But: Oh no. Political job, no office work, no.

Bro: What kind of guy was he?

But: Walter? Oh he was all right, a regular guy. He was all right. I can't say anything against Walter. He was all right. A nice little fellow. But he got mixed up with some fellow over in Oakland, and they shot at him.

Bro: Shot him?

But: If you talk to her, don't mention that at all.

Bro: Certainly not.

But: This fellow shot him. Walter never got well after that. Shot him in the groin, I think; he never recuperated.

Bro: He wasn't messing with another woman, was he?

But: The man who shot him wasn't married to her, either. It was jealousy.

Bro: You've been around San Francisco long enough to see it change quite a bit.

But: My Lord, yes.

Bro: You certainly remember all the Negroes coming in during the War and the changes that they brought.

But: Oh yes. Southern people came here, lots of them. It used to be that you knew everyone who came here. But no, you're the stranger. You're at home, but you're the stranger. It's not like it used to be. That goes for the Caucasian race, too. People come here and they stay here, and the first thing you know, they know more than the people who were born and raised here.

Bro: Do you regret all the Negroes coming in during the Second World War?

But: Oh, no. I don't regret it. The Colored people have as much right to come here as anybody else. But what hit me now, they don't behave themselves. I would like to have a discussion with some of these ministers about how parents raise their children now. But they'd just ignore them. The minister at the pulpit is supposed to be the gospel, be a good citizen. But he's as bad as they are. He doesn't give them advice; all he's there for is the money. Give them [tape unintelligible]... and giving parties and all that. He gets a bucket of money. They're not teaching much. Why do they all want to be ministers? Why, easy living, easy pick-ups.

Bro: When the Negroes started coming in, did a lot of new churches spring up?

But: Yes. They can always build a church. If they can't build a home, have a church built. Scheme around and get the money someplace, and have a church built.

Bro: What other changes do you remember having in the community?

But: What?

Bro: What other changes resulted in the community with the influx of migrants coming in?

But: Well, it was all right. Of course, the shipyards brought quite a few people here; they worked for the government out at Hunter's Point. Quite a few Negroes came in and worked out there. Some of them did pretty well. The first thing you know, they put them on the buses. That's not a bad job. It's an honorable job. Like your wife there works in a bank. You never heard of that before.

Bro: You mentioned the shipyards brought many of these Negroes in. How did they go about doing that?

But: Well, they had to give them a job, the shipyards, because the war was on. They took a lot of young men in the war. You had to go. You were drafted. I worked in the shipyards over near Oakland, in Alameda. I worked there for three days. (Laughter) I got out of that. I went down to Los Angeles. Another man I knew over in Oakland, he was going down there to open a garage. Fellow couldn't read nor write. Asked me if I wanted to go down to Los Angeles to be an automobile mechanic. I said, "Yeah."

But: He said, "All right. You go down there." He gave me \$50; so I went down to Long Beach. He opened up this garage, and I worked for him; he paid me \$40 a week. That's more money than I had ever made before. I stayed down there about three years.

Bro: Did you know any Negroes at the shipyards who came in from the South?

But: Oh, quite a few. I didn't know them personally, but I knew who they were.

Bro: How did they go about bringing them in?

But: They would migrate out here some way. Come out here on the train as a waiter or a porter, and the first thing you know they'd want to stay here. So they'd go out to the shipyards, and they put them on right away. Had no trouble.

Bro: Did the shipyards actually go back to the South to recruit some of these people?

But: I guess they did recruit them up here. They gave them transportation. As I said, some of them were porters and waiters on trains. They would stop in San Francisco, and go over there and get a job. When I was there, I stayed there for three days. I looked at it, and told them I was going to leave. They didn't say anything. That's when I went down to Long Beach. I think the wages were \$3.36 a day. That was pretty good. Six days a week. You made \$18 or \$19 a week. That was pretty good.

Bro: Why did you leave after three days?

But: Oh, I didn't like it. They would put you down in the hull, scraping all the rust off of the hull. It was a tough job. I didn't like it. So, after I met this man from Los Angeles, I just told them, "I may not be in tomorrow. I'm going to quit." It was all right; they didn't care.

Interview with Alfred Butler

May 1, 1978

Interviewer: Jesse Warr, III

Transcriber: Linda Burnham

JW: What was your first wife's name?

AB: Eugenia.

JW: What was her maiden name?

AB: Her maiden name was Rist, R-I-S-T.

JW:

What did she look like?

AB: She was very fair. If you want I'll show you her daughter, my daughter.

JW: The one that worked at Macy's?

AB: Yes. You want to see her picture?

JW: Sure. We'll get it later.

AB: All right. Okay

JW: How did you meet your wife?

AB: Well, we was young people together. She went to Oakland High School. And I, I wasn't going to school then. I was graduated. I didn't graduate, I left high school before the last grade. I got a job.

JW: With Crocker.

AB: H.S. Crocker Company. It was during the Earthquake period. See now, I wanted a job. So I left school and got this job at H.S. Crocker Company. Then I worked there from 1908 until about 19 -- When was World War I?

JW: 1914 it broke out in Europe and 1917 America got involved.

AB: About 1917 I left there. World War I. I had to quit. I was drafted, had to register. But she was -- this daughter of mine now was a baby then and my mother knew the Oakland postmaster. His name was Paul Schaeffer. And he got a job as a, some job with the government to register young men in Oakland, Alameda County. And so my mother says, "Mr. Schaeffer, does Al have to go to war?" He said, "Well, if he's eligible he'll have to go." "Well, he's got a little baby girl and she's only a year old." He said

. He took a stamp, boom, "Exempt." And it said "The father of a motherless child." So I was exempt. But all those fellows my age that were drafted, none of them come

AB: back. About four of them come back that I knew. And most of them didn't come back.

JW: They died in France?

AB: They got killed in war somewhere. Sickness. Mostly sickness. They got fevers and died. Two or three of them got killed but however, most of them died from disease. They got disease or something. About seven of them died. That's the group I used to go with. Now I don't know how many other colored boys got killed in that war, or died that way. I don't know. But I know they didn't come back. About three of them come back.

JW: You said in an earlier part of the interview that you had malaria as a child?

AB: Me?

JW: Yes.

AB: I had malaria fever.

JW: Did you get it here in Oakland?

AB: Oh, no. When I was a kid I was about, I guess about seven years old. And I had malaria fever, oh for about five years. And my family is a very big family. They all cried all the time I thought I was going to die. The whole bunch I'll show you some of the pictures of my uncles. All gone.

JW: How did you catch it here in California?

AB: Oh, I don't know. I was just sickly. Just a sick kid I guess. Course the sanitation wasn't like it is now.

JW: Was it swampy over in that area?

AB: Well, we didn't live in a very nice place. But we had good care. My house was nice and clean. But they had horses and cows in those days in barns. Flies and mosquitoes and all that flew around and that wasn't very good. But I don't know how I contracted it but all my sisters and brothers, nobody else got it but me. I was sick off and on for about, oh I guess for about four or five years.

JW: Have you had any recurrences since then?

AB: No, no.

JW: Been lucky.

AB: Healthiest one in the family. Course I'm aged now. Get a little sickness once in a while like colds, sore throat, something like that. But I've had very good health, thank the Lord, since then.

AB: I had an uncle and aunt that raised me. They took me out to the country, see. And they fed me milk and fresh air and I got rugged and got tough and got hard. Snapped out of it in one year. kid.

JW: What part of the country was that?

AB: A place called Cege near Richmond. You know where Richmond is?

JW: Yes.

AB: Well there's a little town there called Cege, S-T-E-G-E. My uncle bought about ten acres out there. He wanted to have a little home, which he did. And they raised me until I was about sixteen years old. I come to Oakland and I went to school. I went to school out there but then I went to Oakland High School for about two years and, as I say, I quit.

JW: And you met your wife in high school?

AB: Huh?

JW: You met Eugenia Rist in high school?

AB: No, I met her right after I quit my job at Crocker's to go to war, to be drafted. That's when I met her. Met her at that time.

JW: Do you remember where you met her?

AB: I met her at my mother's house. My sister -- they was friends, my sister and her and two or three other girls was all friends. That's how I met her. Through my sister.

JW: What impressed you about her?

AB: Well, looks I guess. Kids. Never had a girlfriend before. But, I went with her about three years. Then we stole off and got married.

JW: Oh. You stole off and got married?

AB: Yes. Her father, he kind of opposed it. He loved her, his only daughter. He lost his wife and he idolized her. Didn't want me to marry her, but however we skipped over to Santa Clara and got married. And I'll show you the lady that went with me when I skipped over there. I got two or three pictures I'll show you.

JW. Good. How did she pass away?

AB: Huh?

JW: Did she die in childbirth or...

AB: She died from childbirth.

JW: She did. This was in the process of having your daughter?

AB: Yes. Childbirth

JW: One of the things I'd like to discuss is the question of passing. You say that your first wife often had to pass on her job or something like that? And some of your cousins did at the Emporium?

AB: Yes, she was very fair, my wife was. She didn't kind of pass but of course, jealousy. You know, some girls were jealous of her because she had a good job. That was my cousin that worked at the Emporium. That was my cousin. Her name was Annette Maddox.

JW: Walter Maddox's daughter. Was her father Walter Maddox?

AB: Walter Maddox. That was her father.

JW: What I'm interested in is, did many people do this and how did it work? Did they have to not speak to their friends and relatives?

AB: What do you mean?

JW: When people had to pass to get a job or something like that.

AB: No, now. Well, it was hard to get a job. Negroes, we had a tough time getting a job. A menial job like washing windows or running errands or something like that. Running an elevator or something like that. But it was hard to get a job. She was qualified. She went to high school. She was a good starter. She worked for white places. But she didn't try to pass. She liked her own people. What I liked, she liked. No prejudice at all.

JW: In some other parts of the country people were somewhat color conscious. Lighter skinned people and dark skinned people didn't socialize.

AB: Well, they do that right now.

JW: Was that true here?

AB: They have done it. They've done it to me. I've got a couple of cousins. One in particular -- the other one is dead. Used to pass. She worked at a place called Ransohoff. They used to make ladies garments. I think they're still in existence in San Francisco. Ransohoff. She worked there. I was her cousin but she wouldn't speak to me. Just keep on walking. I'd just pass her. Didn't make any difference to me.

JW: What about your second wife? What was her name?

AB: Her name was Estella Bowman. E-S-T-E-L-L-A B-O-W-M-A-N. I'll show you a picture. I've got a picture of her also.

JW: She was the one who just visited you?

AB: Huh?

JW: She was the one who was just here recently?

AB: Yes.

JW: And how did you meet her?

AB: Huh?

JW: How did you meet her? You were widowed for several years?

AB: I was never widowed. I was just kind of a young kid chasing around. But I met her at a dance or something like that. Went together for about a year or so. Finally got married. Had a nice wedding here in San Francisco.

JW: Was she a native of the city.

AB: She was born in San Jose, but lived here in San Francisco. She was a young girl when they brought her here. I've got a picture of her son, that was my son, I'll show you that also.

JW: Okay. What did a young couple that were courting in those days do? Did you have to sit up in the living room with her mother.?

AB: My second wife, this one's mother, she was all right. But the other one, her father, he was a bachelor. His wife died and a strict old woman used to raise her. When I'd go to visit why she would stay right there come peeking in all the time to see what you're doing. [Laughs.] That kind of stuff. But we didn't pay no attention to her. I used to kid her. She finally got out of it. But she wanted me to go to church all the time. And she would go along. In Oakland they had streetcars on San Pablo. You acquainted with Oakland?

JW: Yes. I live in Berkeley.

AB: You know where the Fifteenth Street Church is?

JW: I'm not sure.

AB: It's an old established church. And she lived on 35th and Market. We'd have to take the San Pablo car and get off at 35th Street. And she was on the car and she'd get off and she'd walk behind us. We'd walk in front. Then we'd get home and she'd say, "Well, good-night Al. We'll see you tomorrow. Come on in the house dear." She'd go in the house, shut the door and that was it. Anyplace I wanted to go, why she was always on the job to go with us. Couldn't go out to a theater. No, that was impermissible. Said, "When she

AB: gets nineteen years old maybe she can go out."

JW: Oh so both of you were young when you married?

AB: Yes, we was young. Very young.

JW: Was it typical for people to get married in their teens?

AB: I was twenty-one when I got married. Just about twenty-one.

JW: And she was about what -- seventeen or so?

AB: She was eighteen. Just turned eighteen.

JW: So in a sense you didn't really need her parents' consent.

AB: Well, but they were so strict with her. They raised her that way that she minded them. Very straitlaced and strict with her.

JW: That's why you had to run off?

AB: Yes.

JW: Well, your second wife, how did you court her?

AB: You see, her mother knew my mother very well. And they was kids together and we just got to know her. They come over to visit my house across the Bay and we got friendly, and you know how kids are, chased around, went to a couple of dances and I guess fell in love. That was it. Then sneaked over to San Raphael and was married secretly. Sneaked over to San Raphael. With my sister-in-law. Like I said, I'll show you her picture. She said, "All you want to get married? I'll go to San Raphael with you." I says, "Fine." So she did. So I was married by a judge and give him two and a half -- no, three and a half it was. And that was it.

JW: This was your second or first wife?

AB: First wife.

JW: Your second wife you had a wedding.

AB: That's right.

JW: Your children. You have a son and a daughter?

AB: I have a son, I have a son by my first wife and a daughter by my second wife.

JW: And your son works at the HOusing Authority.

AB: Yes.

JW: Do they both live here in San Francisco?

AB: Yes.

JW: When you were bringing them up, what was important to you to -- that you wanted them to learn most of all?

AB: What I wanted them to learn?

JW: Yes.

AB: Well at that time I wasn't particular. He was in World War II. He was drafted and luckily he got in the army and he got some kind of a -- I don't know if it was a corporal or what it was. But they gave them the privilege after the War to go to college if they wanted. So he went to Howard University. Went there for three years. Got a pretty good education. And then he come home and he fooled around a while, got a job here and there, part-time jobs. He used to park automobiles, work in drug stores and so on. Just to keep going. So then he went to Polytechnic High School to finish his course. No, no. He went to high school before he went to war. And then he got into Howard University and that's how it was. And then, he come out, knocked around and so on and so forth. And finally he got serious and he got married. They lived with me for about three years. I lived in another part of the city at that time.

JW: Did it worry you at all having your son go all the way to the other coast to go to school?

AB: It worried me when he had to go to war. That upset me a bit. I was no good for nothing. When I see him go away in that train, that done it. And he was gone for about a year and a half. That just worried the devil out of me. But when the war was over I was all right because I got a letter from him and he was going to Howard University. That relieved me you see. I was all right. He said, "How long can I stay here, Dad?" I said, "Stay there as long as you want." He said, "The government's paying for it." I said, "Stay as long as you want. Get your education." So he did. He stayed there and got a pretty good education and come back, fooled around a while, got a job at an insurance company, worked there for about two years and got another job here and there, and then he quit there and to make a long story short he got a job with the Housing Authority. San Francisco here.

JW: When they were very small children was there any special way that you were about bringing them up? Did you expect them to go to church?

AB: His mother, she adored him. She was good to him. We brought him up all right. The right way. He got good bringing up. We had

AB: a nice home, got plenty to eat, let him do as he pleased, going to school, went back to school and he was all right. He got a job and from there on he worked here and there and then finally got this job at the HOusing Authority and been there ever since.

JW: Did you consider yourself a strict disciplinarian with the children?

AB: AB: No, I'm not strict with them.

JW: How about your wife?

AB: Well, she was more one than I was. I was kind of a -- I loved the kid, I played with him and all that. But, she was good to him. She handled him very good. Raised him nice. But we couldn't get along. We had tiffs, you know. She went away a couple of times and I took her back twice. So I told her not to come back any more. That was it.

JW: When was that?

AB: You ask me for years now and I can't remember.

JW: Well, not exactly. Was it during the War or after the War?

AB: Oh, that was after the War, it was after the War. After he got married. And then that's how the tiff begin. So, she went away once and then she went away again. And I said, "Now, next time you do it, don't come back." So she said, "All right." So she went away and I never took her back. But we was reminiscing on that when she was here. And she can remember the dates but I can't remember dates. She laughed. It's all water under the bridge now. Forget it. We did. So I don't hold no grudge against her now.

JW: How did she and your daughter get along? That was her stepchild.

AB: Stepdaughter. Course there's always jealousy there. My daughter was jealous of her and she was jealous of my daughter. It didn't work. One would come to me and say something -- the friction, it didn't work, didn't work. Jealousy.

JW: So did your daughter move out relatively early?

AB: My daughter went to live in Sacramento with my sister. There's another man I want you to meet. Sorry for cutting you off. Mr. Dunlap, he's from Sacramento, old-timer. Give you a whole lot of dope on Sacramento. I'll tell you where to go. So, my sister raised her, my daughter.

JW: You mean most of her childhood she spent in Sacramento?

AB: My mother raised her. When my mother passed then my sister looked after her and we all lived together. Then, finally my sister in Sacramento took her and she stayed up there ever since. 'Til she graduated from high school.

JW: When you were together with your son, what kinds of things did you did together?

AB: Oh we'd just like go to a show, go out and play ball or something. I was as big a kid as he was. I played ball with him and had a good time. Got along fine. I loved him, he loved me and he loved his mother. I had no trouble with him at all. He was a good boy.

JW: You didn't have to worry about -- some parents are now concerned about children in the neighborhood who might influence their children negatively. Did you have to worry about that then?

AB: No. I had a cousin, Mrs. Holmes, Annette, the one I told you worked at the Emporium. They lived right across from us. And those two kids was always together. Kent Holmes. You know the people across the Bay? He's pretty well-known, he

. Kent Holmes. And they played together, they got along pretty good. Fine. And that's mostly who he went out with 'til he knew some other kids after he got a little bit grown and he had quite a nice little circle. All nice kids. Had not trouble at all with them.

JW: I know that there were no black policemen in the early part, before the Second World War. Is that right?

AB: No, no.

JW: Who had policemen's jobs?

AB: Well, my son-in-law, he was a policeman. That was after the War. During the War he got a job as a policeman.

JW: What's his name?

AB: Oliver Floyd. O-L-I-V-E-R F-L-O-Y-D.

JW: Was he one of the first to be hired?

AB: Well he was one of the first. Now the man I worked for -- I was a chauffeur for a man named Dr. Shumate, and he was a police commissioner and so I told him that my son-in-law wanted to get in the police force. I said, "Doctor, is there any chance." "Does he want to go on the police force?" I said, "Well, he wants to go on there for the time being." "Do you think he

AB: would get on?" He said, "I'll take care of it." Which he did. So he told him what to do and where to go and so on. So they swore him in right away. So he worked there about four years, I guess. And then finally they let him go. put him on that big list for the pension because some of the other men that got drafted, they come back, took their jobs back again. So they cut down then on the hiring of policemen.

JW: Well, what groups of people were there? Were they the Irish or the Italians? Who generally got the police jobs?

AB: In the San Francisco City Hall it was nothing but Irishmen, Catholics. If you weren't a Catholic you couldn't get a job as a policeman. In fact, you couldn't get a job in City Hall at all if you wasn't Irish or a Catholic.

JW: Even the Italians had problems?

AB: What?

JW: Even the Italians had problems getting jobs?

AB: Well, the Italians were Catholics. A few of them, but mostly Irish. Local Irishmen.

JW: What did the community think about police in general? Were there good realations between the police and...

AB: You mean the police department?

JW: Right.

AB: Well it was different then than it is now. A policemen in those days, they didn't molest you. They wanted to be friendly with you. They knew you, knew who you was. There was no murder and rape and all that. That was never thought of. But they get along good. But all policemen are grafters. All got their mitts closed. You know, you can do business with them. They pass that money under the table. I knew a lot of them. They used to be afraid of me because I worked for the Commissioner. You see, they respected me. That's the characteristic of the Irish policeman here in San Francisco and Catholics. The priests were behind them and all the fathers. The Dominican fathers were all with them. A policeman couldn't because he was Irish, and a Catholic and they would donate a lot of money to the Church.

JW: I think you said you had occasionally done a little touring down in the Barbary Coast area?

AB: Oh, yes, yes. We used to go out to the Barbary Coast, another kid and I.

JW: Wasn't there shady activity down in that area?

AB: What do you mean?

JW: I don't know. Prostitution and gambling.

AB: There was prostitution, a little gambling. But, here's what happened. There was a fellow down there named Lew Purcell. He had a place on Pacific between Kearny and Montgomery. There was another man named Sam King. He was down Pacific between Montgomery and Battery -- the next street. First they was partners, then they split. But things weren't bad then. It wasn't like it is now. You'd go there and you'd want to dance you know, and after a while a girl come to you and tell you "You want to go upstairs?" "Yeah." She'd go the back way and you'd go around the front and go up the front stairs, go on and pay your dollar and do a little business and come on away and go on down and finish your dancing a little drinking, they'd give you some weak gin with soda water in it, fifteen cents, you'd dance and the music played again and you danced again. And you'd see this old girl again and you'd forget her and you'd look for another one. One dollar.

JW: Did the police just look the other way?

AB: They never bothered Purcell but he used to pay off, you know, pay the police off. It was just like they'd play the music and dancing, that was all. No robbery, no , no fighting in those days. It was all right. You had a nice time.

JW: Were there any colored women working there then?

AB: Where we went they were all colored. We was barred from white places, they didn't take Negroes in white places. There was two places, Lew Purcell's and Sam King's. Only two places down there colored.

JW: I guess white men could come there if they wanted?

AB: White people, oh people used to go slumming. They called it slumming. But some of those old white guys out there they take those girls upstairs just the same.

JW: Why do you think there's more crime in the city today?

AB: Why do I? Because the way things are going. Everything is corrupt now. Do anything.

JW: Why do you think that is?

AB: Well, that's the trend of the times. You never heard of burglary and rape and thugging and burglary and all that. All the people in the street. Growing up we never locked our front door. We never had a key, didn't know what a key was. We come in all hours of the night, just walked in, open the door and come on in.

they same way. We never had any trouble.

JW: You were a chauffeur for...

AB: Dr. Shumate.

JW: For how many years?

AB: I've been working for the family for fifty years.

JW: What do you think are some of the advantages to your line of work?

AB: What?

JW: What do you think are some of the advantages to that kind of work?

AB: At that time?

JW: Yes.

AB: At that time it was tough. When I went to him he had eighteen drugstores. When he died he had thirty. So he took a liking to me some how or another and I'd get all these colored janitors and I'd put them to work in the drugstore. Made twenty-two dollars a week. That was pretty good in those days. And I had, I think I had forty janitors working there. I got them the jobs. He sent them to me. I said work, or I put them to work, go out to store number 16, go out to store number 14, so on. And that was it. My say so. And I had no trouble with them at all. And that was the only kind of jobs you could get. Or running an elevator. He had four buildings and elevator, I'd get a man as a janitor in the building. I got them all work. And I don't know how many colored fellows I got work for in San Francisco -- through him. I'd say, "Doctor, I got a friend here he wants to get a job." "What can he do?" "He can do anything." "All right. I'll see him. We'll talk about it later on. Where's he live?" "He's living any place he can. To make a long story short he's stayed at my house for two weeks. And he's got to get a job." So next day he got him a job, got him a good job. He was a maintenance at a big office building downtown. See, that

AB: paid about \$150 a month and that was good money. So he got him that job with my say. White man would have got that job.

JW: Did you enjoy being a chauffeur or did you find it tiring? Did it disrupt your schedule? How was it?

AB: It was kind of monotonous but I didn't mind because he was so darn good to me. When my boy was born -- he built the St. Francis hospital, he and two other men, they owned it, they was the big directors. So, my wife had to go to the hospital and he says, "Now Al, when your wife goes to the hospital let me know." I said, "All right." And so, to make a long story short, when she got ready to go he said, "You take the car and take her down there and I'll make all the arrangements where to put her." So he put her -- in those days it was twenty-five dollars a day for a room. She had a room as big as this. Alone. And a nurse day and night. Three nurses.

JW: Twenty-five dollars a day?

AB: Twenty-five dollars a day.

JW: That was expensive even for then, right?

AB: What's that?

JW: That must have been very expensive for that time.

AB: At that time. But he paid, wouldn't let me pay nothing. He said, "Don't you pay a cent. You understand that?" "All right, doctor." So I got kind of ashamed of myself and I save a hundred dollars, you know, for the childbirth. And so one day I sneaked down there and I paid the cashier a hundred dollars for her stay there. And so, he didn't say nothing. When she got ready to go home he said, "Your wife going home today?" I said, "She's going home this afternoon." "Well you take the car and you take her home. Did you pay anything at the hospital?" I said, "Yes, I paid a hundred dollars." He said, "Didn't I tell you not to pay anything? I told you not to pay a cent." So he jumped out the car and he went there and he come back with five hundred dollar bills. He said, "Don't you pay nothing. Don't pay nobody a cent. Nobody." See now, that's the kind of a man he was, to me.

JW: I read in one of my sources that there was a colored chauffeurs' association in L.A. and there was one here around the time of the first World War. Do you know anything about that?

AB: No.

JW: You are now retired, more or less?

AB: Well, yes. I place, he lets me place, pays me a nice salary to live on. I get my Social Security. I get along pretty good.

JW: What effect do you think retirement has had on your life?

AB: What?

JW: Do you feel your life has changed because of retirement in any significant way?

AB: My life has changed? Well, I'll tell you, he never let me quit. I quit him three or four times, then he'd send his wife after me. He just liked me, took me into the family. He'd give me anything I wanted. Never wanted for nothing. Give me anything I want. And so one time maybe I can get away. I said, "Joe Louis is going to fight and I'd like to go back to New York and see him fight." He said, "You're going back to New York to see Louis fight? It's going to cost you a lot of money." I said, "No, I sold subscriptions to the San Francisco Chronicle." I sold two hundred subscriptions in two weeks. Two hundred. See, that's all the friends I had. All the fellows down at the store bought, you know, bought the paper for a year. And I got all them and all their friends. I got them in two weeks. So I went down to the Chronicle and told them about it. So the guy come and said to me, he says, "Well you know you got to get three or four hundred subscriptions. The more you get the more money you will get. So I said, "Here, here's two hundred right now." So the guy like to had a stroke right there. Two hundred well I said, "Here's two hundred subscriptions right now. They're all for one year." So I had myself a . But I gave those to another guy, he didn't have any. I give them to him. The guy come in, he says "All right, Mr. Butler. We'll give you a round-trip ticket to New York. We'll give you three days at the Hotel. And we'll give you a ringside seat, a thirty dollar ringside seat."

End Tape 3, Side 1

Begin Tape 3, Side 2

AB: 1938 or 1958. See I can't remember dates.

JW: I think it would have been right before the Second World War or so. Or right in that period.

AB: IN that period because Max Schmelling -- the second time he fought Max Schmelling, the first time Max Schmelling knocked him out. And this was the second fight. I can't remember years.

JW: That's okay. You said that several times you threatened to quit. why would you want to quit?

AB: Well I just got -- you know, sometimes you get fed up on a job. But he wouldn't let me, after he gave me the privilege of going to New York and give me money besides. I come back, I considered it and I said, oh I better stay with this job. Because you couldn't get a job to save your neck.

All these guys wanted it but he let his son take it on when I was away. His son drove him around. When I come back the man almost hugged me and kissed me. That's how much he liked me.

JW: When the Shumates would go out to a dinner party or something like that and you had to drive them, what did you do while they were there, while they were at the affair?

AB: Well, I'll tell you. I very seldom took them out in the evening. But in the day time I'd take them out. He'd tell me, some place he'd go, he'd tell me to . He didn't do very much of that , but she did. When I'd take her I'd just leave her and then pick her up.

JW: Oh you didn't have to stay?

AB: Oh, no, no. I'd do what I want. I'd tell her when to come. If the teas was at two o'clock I'd say, "Mrs. Shumate, I'll be back at five. You be ready." She'd say, "I'll be ready." She'd be down there waiting for me. Give me the money go and get you a dinner, give you five or ten dollars, go out and do this, do that.

JW: Was the trip to New York to see Joe Louis -- What did you think of New York?

AB: Oh I didn't like it. like San Francisco. You been to New York?

JW: Yes. A lot of times.

AB: I didn't care much for it. I didn't care for it. The only thing that made me mad was, we come back by the way of Washington, D.C.

AB: We stopped in Washington coming back. And there was a taxi cab right there where the train stopped and I was going to get the taxi, I was going to go somewhere. I had an address in Washington. And the guy says, "What are you fellows going to do?" I said, "I want you to take us someplace." I give him the address where to take us. "I'm sorry . See that taxi over there? He'll take you." It was a colored man. They wouldn't take you in a white taxi. That was Washington, D.C.

JW: I grew up there.

AB: Did you?

JW: Yes. They just desegregated when I was a teenager.

AB: Segregated. This guy was nice about it. He said, "Where you fellows from." I said, "I'm from San Francisco." "Oh, well, you see that fellow over there. He'll take you where you want to go." He smile about it. He couldn't help it. So we dismissed that.

JW: You traveled back and forth on that trip on an airplane or on a train?

AB: A train.

JW: I guess train travel in those days was

AB: Oh yes, it was nice. Nice traveling. We stopped off at Denver stopped off at...

JW: Chicago maybe, or St. Louis.

AB: Went to St. Louis, not Chicago . We stopped in three or four different cities. Laid over there. We had to take different trains you know. Lay over half a day or four or five hours. Tell us what train to take back. Other than that, that's the only discrimination like that was in Washington, D.C. The taxi cab.

JW: Was this your first trip to the East?

AB: First time.

JW: Have you traveled any since then? Have you been overseas at all?

AB: Oh no. I don't go overseas. Far as I've been was that trip to New York. Course I been to Los Angeles and back across a lot of times that way. But not much out of the state.

JW: Is there any where that you would like to go that you've heard about?

AB: Well, I was thinking once, they wanted me to go, I could have gone to Honolulu once. Because my boss, Miss Shumate, my bosses daughter,

AB: she married a man by the name of George Hanson. He was the manager of the San Francisco Airport. He says, "Al, when do you want to go to Honolulu?" I said, "When you give me a ticket." He said, "You want to go tomorrow?" I said, "You devil, I can't go tomorrow, Mr. Hanson." "When do you want to go. Let me know and I'll give you a round-trip ticket." But I had no inclination to go somehow or another. But now I'm sorry that I didn't go. But, he needed me. I know he needed me. I didn't want to get big-headed. Because he was a nice guy and I didn't want to take advantage of him because he to go. But he offered me a round-trip ticket, all expenses to Honolulu.

JW: I just wanted to backtrack for a minute. When you were in New York did you get up to Harlem?

AB: Yes.

JW: What did you think of Harlem? Well, it wasn't like it is now,

AB: I've been told. Because my son, he went to Harlem and than it was. But now they mug you there most places at night. But like I say, it's about the same here as it is there. Not much difference. But no, I didn't pay much attention to it. Walking around the streets, you know. Only there for four days. Walk around and visit this place and that place.

JW: Was it shocking to you to see somany black people in one place?

AB: No, no. It didn't disturb me. They minded their business and we minded ours. Walked around, went to a saloon, got a glass of beer. The two fellows I went with, they was booze hounds. I had to nurse them along. They took all my money. I had to pay their . But we had a lot of fun. I didn't care because the money was given to me. It wasn't out of my own pocket. We enjoyed it and I got along very good on the trip. Only that incident we had in Washington, D.C. about that taxi cab.

JW: How did people respond when you told them you were from California? Did they think that was exciting?

AB: They'd say, "Where you live?" "San Francisco." "Oh, big city. Nice place. I'd like to go out there. How you like it?" And all that, you know. It's similar to New York, to me. San Francisco. Same scale.

JW: You said that your family hadn't been very attached to any church when you were coming up. I was wondering, have you since decided to join church?

AB: My family, they didn't force us to do anything. I used to go to Sunday school, like any other kid. But we weren't religious like a lot of people are not. They weren't that religious people. My mother was a kind of a clairvoyant and she give us kids good advice, you know, and treated us nice. We had a nice home life. Go to Sunday school every Sunday and that was it. But I wasn't a devout church goer. None of my family was. But my mother would go to church when she felt like it and my grandmother the same way. But they weren't devout church going people.

JW: What denomination were they?

AB: Baptist. Or Methodist. About the same thing.

JW: Now that you're an adult, have you gone back or gone farther away?

AB: What do you mean? In religion?

JW: Do you go to church more often now?

AB: Well I did for a while. But since I've been living here I don't go to church like I did. I go to church maybe twice a month or once a month on a Sunday. But since I've been out here I don't go to church. But I've learned to treat people nice and be kind to them and I read what they call Unity. I read that book. I get a lot of good information from it. A lot of incentive, that does me good. I like that. But if I go to church I want to be a real church goer. Because I do things I shouldn't do. But now I don't do them. I try to respect myself and respect others. But I'm no church goer so I'll be frank and tell you.

JW: You said your mother was a clairvoyant.
Did she hold seances and that kind of thing.

AB: Yes, she did. She was very clever at that.

JW: Did she charge for it?

AB: Towards the last she did. She got a dollar. Had people sit for her. She was good. She used cards. And she would tell you the truth. A lot of people come to her and she couldn't do nothing for them. She'd tell them, "I can't do nothing for you, so and so." But she told you things they seem to come out. I don't

AB: know how she done it.

JW: What did she say was the source of her inspiration? Was it religion or some other source?

AB: She was a religious person but, as I say, she didn't go to church much. But she was very religious and she knew she could tell you things. She'd tell you so and so and so and so, so and so is going to happen, this is going to happen. Your husband is going to get a nice job, he's going be advanced in salary and so on. And people would say, "When?" "About two weeks." She was that good. So in about two weeks or maybe a month they'd get a job and they'd come back and tell her. She was that good. She could read your mind.

JW: That must have been a little unnerving.

AB: Unnerving to me. about the Barbary Coast. Another kid and I we used to go to the Barbary Coast. She'd say, "You been over to the Barbary Coast last night. What did you do over there?" "Oh we just danced, Mamma. Had a nice time." "Don't you ever tell me again you been to the Barbary Coast, I'm going to tell your father." So one time my brother-in-law, he married my oldest sister, this other kid and I went to the Barbary Coast -- Dr. Leaner, he lives over in Oakland, foot doctor. He and I was raised together, same age. Went over to the Barbary Coast and my brother-in-law, he was there, Sunday night he was there. Because on Sundays people didn't have recreation like they have now. You can go to a park you can go to a theater. At that time you'd all go down to the Barbary Coast at night. So he seen this fellow and me down there. So on Sundays he and his wife, that's my sister, they would come over to Oakland and have dinner, on a Sunday. And so, -- my brother-in-law's name was Bob, Bob Gilmore -- he says, "Hey, Dad. I'd like to speak to you. I'd like to tell you something." Kept looking at me all the time. So I knew he was going to tell my father we was down at the Barbary Coast. And so they went in the pantry. My mother told me this because my father told my mother. He didn't tell me then. So they went in the pantry and we had a long pantry. And he shut the door. I seen them go in there. So here's what he said -- I didn't know that until my mother told me, because my father told her. Said,

AB: "Say, Dad, I'll tell you something about Al." That's me. He says, "I seen him down at the Barbary Coast and that's no place for him." Father says, "Um huh. When did you see him?" "Oh about two Sunday nights ago. He shouldn't be down there. It's kind of bad for him. He's too young to go down there, he and Earl Leaner. I seen him down there and you got to be pretty careful." So he finally wound up and my father said, "Now Bob, now you're married to my daughter. You seen him down there, now what were you doing down there?" [Laughter.] That stopped him. He said, "He's a kid, he had a right to be down there, he's just learning something. But, if you seen him down there if you wasn't down there you wouldn't have seen him. What were you doing down there?" My father told my mother. He said old Bob went out and opened the door, went out and said to my sister Grace, says, "Come on Grace, let's go home." So they left.

JW: Did your father have a good sense of humor?

AB: Oh yes. He was regular. I take after him in a lot of respects. I can see that. My father was good. I'll tell you one thing about my father. Good to everybody. During the Earthquake, 1906, all the people in the neighborhood knew the Butlers. We lived on the corner, nice house. Irish people down there. They all knew the Butlers. Butler, Harry Butler, Todd Butler. All the friends. All the girls used to play together. So during the Earthquake there was no relief. Just had to starve. All the chimneys knocked down, the brick chimneys knocked down, had to cook in the backyard. So my father was a porter on the railroad, on the Overland Limited. He used to run to Chicago. So he made a trip out and he brought back about fifteen hams. He got them for about twenty-five cents a piece. People worked in the stockyards would get them, you know, and they'd bring them down to sell them. He'd give them two bits a piece for them. Bring home big hams and fifteen twenty dozen eggs. Stop and get the eggs in Omaha, Nebraska. Fellows would sell eggs, you know, ten cents a dozen. Twenty-five or thirty dozen eggs. He brought all that food home. He brought it home to my house and all the neighbors down there feed them all. See they had enough food there to last them about two weeks. Hams and eggs, potatoes, fruits, vegetables and everything. He put a lot of money to

- AB: buy for all these people and asked for no money. The children, the mothers the fathers, two or three hundred people come there and eat for about two weeks. . Never kicked about it.
- JW: What did he think about his job as a pullman porter? Did he enjoy the line of work? or did he just take it because the money was good?
- AB: Well of course like I said job as a pullman porter. But at that time he was on the observation car of the Overland Limited. He took the first electric lighted Overland Limited out between Oakland and Chicago. He had the car where they had liquor you know, that car on the back end had an observation thing on the back. You know, people sat in the back there and ride in the back of the car. That was the observation car. He had that on this train.
- JW: Was this section of the car covered with glass or just out in the open?
- AB: It was just a car and it had a back with canvas over it. People sat in the back there and ride. In the vestibule in the back. The last car in the train. And they had the bar in that car. So he took the first train out, first Overland Limited out. But how he got that job was through my uncle, Walter Maddox, the man that raised me. He was a ticket expert, used to make up the tickets for the trains you know, and make the schedules, timetable expert. And he was so good at it, so he had a . So he got my father a first job on that train.
- JW: I wanted to ask you about your grandmother. You said that one of you grandmothers, I can't remember right now whether it was your mother's mother or your father's mother, had an English accent.
- AB: My mother's mother.
- JW: Where did she get that? Was she from the West Indies?
- AB: No. She was from Philadelphia. But she was part Cherokee Indian. But my grandmother was a smart woman. She didn't look like a colored. She was, well she was much lighter than me. Lighter than you and me both. She was very proper and very distinguished woman. Had a eloquent vocabulary and could talk very distinctly and cleverly. Never used any broken slang or broken English. Correct English. And she taught me a piece, a little story I'll

AB: never forget. I know it right now. And she'd make us kids stand up and talk, recite and write. And if we'd make a mistake in our grammar she'd correct us. And she'd say, now so and so and so and so. Now I want you to be on your dignity -- we was going to be in some play -- I want you to be on your dignity and when you get up there don't act bashful , you stand up there and talk and talk loud and distinct so people can understand you. talk so fast. So that's the way she was. Smart and very intelligent.

JW: There was another colored woman out here who said she was born in Philadelphia. Mary Ellen Pleasant, Mammy Pleasant.

AB: Mammy Pleasant, oh yeah.

JW: Do you remember anything about her?

AB: Oh. I don't remember. I knew where she lived. But my first father-in-law, Mr. Rist, my first wife's father...

JW: His name was Ray Rist, right?

AB: Eugene Rist. He worked at the Baldwin Hotel. He was very fair, he looked like a white man.

JW: The one that used to be across the street from this house?

AB: You know where the Flood Building is?

JW: Yes.

AB: It was the -- what's the name of that hotel? Right where the Flood Building is. They tore it down. The Earthquake knocked it down and they built the Flood Building on that site. The Baldwin, the Baldwin Hotel. He was the headwaiter there. And he knew Mammy Pleasant. He knew a lot of those political men in those days. And she was -- oh he knew her very well. I don't know whether she knew he was colored or not but he told us all about her, how she went with those politicians in San Francisco. She'd make them toe the mark and tell them what they had or not and tell them what to do and what not to do. She was that clever with them. The mayor and all the supervisors and all them. She had them right under her thumb.

JW: How did she get that kind of power?

AB: I don't know. She brought a lot of colored people out here and they say she brought them from the West Indies over to the United States some way. I never did quite get that story.

AB: And she got them here in the United States. She got them over here some way, through political power and her brain. Told them what to do and what not to do. She was that clever. She could make you do something or tell you what to do and what not do and you'd better do it because she'd tell you if you don't do it why so and so and so and so is going to happen. That's the way she handled those political guys here in San Francisco.

JW: Was she a clairvoyant too?

AB: What?

JW: Was she a clairvoyant too?

AB: No. She was just smart. Politician. Smart.

JW: Do you remember what she looked like?

AB: She was very dark. He had some of her pictures but I don't know where they went. He had some of her pictures. She was kind of a dark woman. But intelligent. Straight talk and didn't take a back seat for nobody. She knew it. The mayor of San Francisco, he idolized her. She'd tell him what to do. "Well, you better do this Mayor, you better do that." Because Mr. Rist, my father-in-law told us all about it. How she handled the politicians.

JW: Did you think there was any difference between Oakland and San Francisco in those days?

AB: Oh my Lord. Used to call Oakland the bedroom of San Francisco. Because everybody that lived in Oakland worked in San Francisco. See a lot of people couldn't get any jobs in Oakland. There wasn't enough. So they called Oakland the bedroom of San Francisco. I commuted back and forth there for about twelve years. I worked at H.S. Crocker Company. On the ferry boat. Commute was two dollars a month. Ten cents a ride, twenty cents a round-trip. On the boat. See you take the boat and then when you get over to Oakland you take the train to any destination you want to go in Oakland, Berkeley, or Alameda.

JW: Did you feel that you could live better in Oakland or is it because you were raised there?

AB: Oh because I was born in Oakland. Couldn't get a job. Get a job running a elevator over there. That was the kind of job you could get. Shining shoes or something like that. You could not get a

AB: I'm telling you. No such thing as working in a grocery store or a big clothing store or something like that. No. Never seen a colored man working there unless he was the janitor. We had a fellow named Al Lawrence. He had the first job in Oakland when they built the City Hall in Oakland in 1911 he got a job as the head janitor. And so that was one of the best jobs in Oakland.

JW: Do you remember the general strike here in 1934?

AB: What strike was that?

JW: The one when they had a lot of violence the day after the fourth of July. Everything was closed down. It was connected I think with the longshoremen's strike.

AB: Oh the longshoremen's strike. Yeah. That longshoremen's strike was a bad strike. It closed everything up. All the unions come together and they wouldn't do no work. They all amalgamated together and they wouldn't... Oh, it was bad. I had forgotten about that. All those nice docks down there, beautiful. was just dormant. Stevedores -- it was a tough strike, tough strike.

JW: Well, perhaps before we look at the pictures, I just want to know what you think about this project. Do you think these interviews are valuable? How did you feel about the interview?

AB: About what?

JW: This interview.

AB: Between you and I?

JW: Yes.

AB: Oh, I haven't told you nothing. If they can understand what I'm talking about. Oh

JW: Oh they'll understand.

AB: I talk so darn fast. I can't talk like I used to. However... Your memory is not like it used to be. A man eighty-eight years old, he can't function.

JW: Your memory is just as good as mine.

AB: I got a fair memory. But my grandmother taught me how to remember. She told us what to do and you can remember anything. But I've forgotten all about that. Now I'm going to tell you something that she taught me, if you want to hear it I'll tell you. I can

AB: recite it right now. That's how good my memory is. Here's what she used to say. She said,

"You all must remember that it was in Virginia that Captain John Smith and his people built the first English town in America. This same Virginia, no more than one hundred years later, was the birth place of George Washington whose memory is the pride of the whole country." That's the way she used to talk. I could talk better than that then, but I can't now. That's as far as I know. I used to know the whole thing. That's as far as I can go now. But she remembered that and she used to tell us what to do to remember. And I try to think what Grandma told me. Said, "If you learn this you can remember anything." Put it in one ear and out the other.

JW: Wish I knew what that trick was. Sounds like it was very useful. I think I'll turn this off now and we can look at the pictures.

End of Interview

